BLOODCHILDREN:

Stories by the Octavia E. Butler Scholars

edited by Nisi Shawl

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Table of Contents

Nalo Hopkinson — Introduction

Before Conception

Octavia E. Butler — Speech Sounds
Vonda N. McIntyre — Octavia Estelle Butler

2007

Christopher Caldwell — My Love Will Never Die
Shweta Narayan — Falling into the Earth

2008

Caren Gussoff — Free Bird
Mary Elizabeth Burroughs — Impulse

2009

Rochita Loenen-Ruiz — Dancing in the Shadow of the Once

2010

Kai Ashante Wilson — "Légendaire."
Erik Owomoyela — Steal the Sky

2011

Jeremy Sim — /sit
Dennis Y. Ginoza — Re: Christmas, Bainbridge Island

2012

Indrapramit Das — The Runner of n-Vamana
Lisa Bolekaja — The Saltwater African

Nisi Shawl — Acknowledgments

Contributor Biographies

Copyright & Credits

Introduction

Nalo Hopkinson

The contributors to *Bloodchildren* each found Octavia E. Butler's writing in their own ways, but I suspect that for many of them, as it was for me, doing so was the result of a deliberate—and deliberately contrary—voyage of discovery. The science fiction community still largely believes that identity doesn't matter. It's dismayingly common for readers to ridicule those among them who ask questions about the diversity of the field.

I was probably in my early twenties when it first occurred to me to find out whether there were Anglophone black science fiction and fantasy writers other than Chip Delany, whose work I utterly adored, and still do. I was not yet a writer. I hadn't even thought seriously about becoming one. This would have been 1981 or so, pre-Internet. In fact, it was the year that IBM launched the first personal computers. So there was no such thing as doing a Web search for the information I wanted. Luckily, I was a clerk in a public library at the time. I used the library's very much analog resources to conduct my search. Octavia E. Butler was one of the black science fiction writers I found, along with Steven Barnes and fellow Canadians Charles Saunders and Claude-Michel Prevost (Claude-Michel, like me, is originally from the Caribbean; he from Haiti, and I from Jamaica). I was hard put to find any other black writers in the genre, and Octavia was the only woman. It was 14 years before Nisi Shawl's short story "The Rainses" would be published in Asimov's; 14 years before Tananarive Due's first novel *The Between*; there were as yet no stories by Andrea Hairston, Alaya Dawn Johnson, Tobias Buckell, Nalo Hopkinson, and a host of others. The books of the handful of black SF/F novelists I was able to track down were scattered in libraries all across Canada and the rest of North America.

The library's interlibrary loan process came to the rescue. I knew that loans from outside the North York Public Library system, where I worked, had a cost attached, but hey; I was also a tax-paying library patron. I put in requests to have the books delivered to my library branch.

Octavia's books were among the first to show up; *Patternmaster,*

Survivor, Mind of My Mind, and *Wild Seed*. Understand that in order to even do the search, I'd had to postulate that more than one black SF/F author existed. I'd had to infer the existence of the creature from the empty outline created around it in the canon. (I would after that ask myself where the other writers of color were, and go on to look for Asian, South Asian, First Nations, etc. writers.) But I was well-placed to assume the existence of something I'd never even heard tell of. After all, my birth region of the Caribbean has had a vibrant literary tradition for centuries now, despite the fact that lots of people think that the Caribbean's charms are limited to sun, sand, rum, male prostitutes catering to the tourist trade, and really good marijuana. My own father was part of that literary tradition.

Yet holding Octavia's books in my hand was the equivalent of an explorer finding uncharted territory. I read them all at a gulp. They sucked me in, they held my attention, they made me think, they often made me sad. And—this is key—as Chip's writing had done, stories by Octavia and Charles and Steven and Claude-Michel began to show me myself in the genre that I loved. Not just in terms of race; to think that is to miss the point almost entirely. But in terms of African diasporic culture; our aesthetics, our histories and lore, our speech stylings, our experiences and understandings of the world, our humor. It would be years before I perceived the playful, ironic humor in Octavia's work. It's there, it's pointed, and it's mischievous as hell. If you don't believe me, read *Fledgling*, her final novel.

It's tough for budding writers. They are surrounded by messages that writing is a frivolous occupation that can only lead to tears and poverty. If you're a person of color who aspires to write science fiction and fantasy, there are the added subtle and not-so-subtle "Keep Out" signs posted around the perimeters of the genre as additional discouragement. When Octavia was 13, her aunt, probably trying to spare her heartache, told her that "Negroes can't be writers." Luckily for us, that only made a young Octavia even more determined. And she never forgot how much it means for an aspiring writer to have a little encouragement. Lisa Bolekaja, whose fine story "The Saltwater African" is one of the treats awaiting you in this anthology, was working in a Los Angeles bookstore when she first met Octavia. In fact, it was Octavia who urged her to attend the Clarion science fiction and fantasy writing workshop.

It was 1996 when I first saw and heard Octavia; not in person, but in John Akomfrah's Afrofuturist documentary film "The Last Angel of History." The film was premiering at the Toronto International Film Festival. It listed Chip and Octavia as two of the interviewees appearing in it. I had fulfilled my dream of meeting Chip at Toronto's International Festival of Authors in 1992. And now here was a chance to see Octavia, even if through the medium of film.

I was in the audience for the screening of "The Last Angel of History." The film was good; intriguing and affirming in its conceit of a black cyberhistory of music. I became more and more excited as it got to the part where a couple of black science fiction authors would have their say. The interview with Chip made me very happy. When it came time for Octavia's part, I was just about beside myself with anticipation.

On the screen, the camera faded to black. A voice began speaking into the darkness, talking about science fiction and blackness. At first I was puzzled, because the voice was deep enough to be a man's. Did I have the order of the authors' appearances wrong?

Then the film showed us the person speaking. It was Octavia. That was the first time I'd realized her stature, her gravitas. Of course her voice fit her frame!

In years to come, I would publish my own first novel, and I was thrilled beyond measure when my editor secured a quote from Octavia for it. I would keep reading and enjoying her work. I would eventually meet her in person, while I was on tour. I would take part in readings and appearances with her. Would have rare occasions where she and I could just chat. We were never close friends, but we became colleagues. I cherished that. And she remains one of my beacons as I make my way as a writer in this genre.

I interviewed Octavia when she came through Toronto to launch *Fledgling*. Her appearance alarmed me. I knew her to be a strong, active person, a hiker with an exemplary diet. But the barely half-mile stroll from the bookstore to the lecture hall had left her gasping for air, her skin grey. Before we went on, she told me that she'd been ill, and that the medication was making it difficult for her to write. She was distressed about that, but as was Octavia's way, she was quietly so. I must have reassured myself that it would be okay. She would find the right dosage of medication. She would get better. We went on stage, and she was her usual sharp and generous self. I watched, amused, as she gently deflected a respectfully veiled inquiry from an audience member about her sexuality. No matter what you'll read in academic papers about her, based on unverified secondary and tertiary sources, Octavia was straight. I knew her well enough to know that she was heterosexual, and to know that she was an intensely private person who would probably have found it distasteful to have her sexuality argued in public.

Then came that morning when I turned on my computer to find the news that she'd died. I was floored. It was as though a section of the path beneath my feet had suddenly crumbled and fallen away. In the back of my mind, I'd assumed that Octavia would always be there. She was only 58; a mere 13 years older than me. We were both puppies! The obituary for a 58 year old doesn't say, "She led a good,

long life." Fifty eight is when you're just settling into the traces for the long haul. She was snatched away, and sometimes that still makes me cry.

And now we have this anthology, *Bloodchildren*. Its title is a play on "Bloodchild," the title of one of Octavia's rare short stories. The anthology is a testament, a praise song, a memorial, a healing balm. It comprises inspired, surprising and challenging fiction from writers who were recipients of the scholarship instituted in Butler's name to support writers of color. The writers are of many races and cultures, but in this, they are bloodchildren. They are kindred.

But that's another story.

Speech Sounds

Octavia E. Butler

There was trouble aboard the Washington Boulevard bus. Rye had expected trouble sooner or later in her journey. She had put off going until loneliness and hopelessness drove her out. She believed she might have one group of relatives left alive—a brother and his two children twenty miles away in Pasadena. That was a day's journey one-way, if she were lucky. The unexpected arrival of the bus as she left her Virginia Road home had seemed to be a piece of luck—until the trouble began.

Two young men were involved in a disagreement of some kind, or, more likely, a misunderstanding. They stood in the aisle, grunting and gesturing at each other, each in his own uncertain T stance as the bus lurched over the potholes. The driver seemed to be putting some effort into keeping them off balance. Still, their gestures stopped just short of contact—mock punches, hand games of intimidation to replace lost curses.

People watched the pair, then looked at one another and made small anxious sounds. Two children whimpered.

Rye sat a few feet behind the disputants and across from the back door. She watched the two carefully, knowing the fight would begin when someone's nerve broke or someone's hand slipped or someone came to the end of his limited ability to communicate. These things could happen anytime.

One of them happened as the bus hit an especially large pothole and one man, tall, thin, and sneering, was thrown into his shorter opponent.

Instantly, the shorter man drove his left fist into the disintegrating sneer. He hammered his larger opponent as though he neither had nor needed any weapon other than his left fist. He hit quickly enough, hard enough to batter his opponent down before the taller man could regain his balance or hit back even once.

People screamed or squawked in fear. Those nearby scrambled to get out of the way. Three more young men roared in excitement and gestured wildly. Then, somehow, a second dispute broke out between two of these three—probably because one inadvertently touched or

hit the other.

As the second fight scattered frightened passengers, a woman shook the driver's shoulder and grunted as she gestured toward the fighting.

The driver grunted back through bared teeth. Frightened, the woman drew away.

Rye, knowing the methods of bus drivers, braced herself and held on to the crossbar of the seat in front of her. When the driver hit the brakes, she was ready and the combatants were not. They fell over seats and onto screaming passengers, creating even more confusion. At least one more fight started.

The instant the bus came to a full stop, Rye was on her feet, pushing the back door. At the second push, it opened and she jumped out, holding her pack in one arm. Several other passengers followed, but some stayed on the bus. Buses were so rare and irregular now, people rode when they could, no matter what. There might not be another bus today—or tomorrow. People started walking, and if they saw a bus they flagged it down. People making intercity trips like Rye's from Los Angeles to Pasadena made plans to camp out, or risked seeking shelter with locals who might rob or murder them.

The bus did not move, but Rye moved away from it. She intended to wait until the trouble was over and get on again, but if there was shooting, she wanted the protection of a tree. Thus, she was near the curb when a battered blue Ford on the other side of the street made a U-turn and pulled up in front of the bus. Cars were rare these days—as rare as a severe shortage of fuel and of relatively unimpaired mechanics could make them. Cars that still ran were as likely to be used as weapons as they were to serve as transportation. Thus, when the driver of the Ford beckoned to Rye, she moved away warily. The driver got out—a big man, young, neatly bearded with dark, thick hair. He wore a long overcoat and a look of wariness that matched Rye's. She stood several feet from him, waiting to see what he would do. He looked at the bus, now rocking with the combat inside, then at the small cluster of passengers who had gotten off. Finally he looked at Rye again.

She returned his gaze, very much aware of the old forty-five automatic her jacket concealed. She watched his hands.

He pointed with his left hand toward the bus. The dark-tinted windows prevented him from seeing what was happening inside.

His use of the left hand interested Rye more than his obvious question. Left-handed people tended to be less impaired, more reasonable and comprehending, less driven by frustration, confusion, and anger.

She imitated his gesture, pointing toward the bus with her own left hand, then punching the air with both fists.

The man took off his coat revealing a Los Angeles Police Department uniform complete with baton and service revolver.

Rye took another step back from him. There was no more LAPD, no more any large organization, governmental or private. There were neighborhood patrols and armed individuals. That was all.

The man took something from his coat pocket, then threw the coat into the car. Then he gestured Rye back, back, toward the rear of the bus. He had something made of plastic in his hand. Rye did not understand what he wanted until he went to the rear door of the bus and beckoned her to stand there. She obeyed mainly out of curiosity. Cop or not, maybe he could do something to stop the stupid fighting.

He walked around the front of the bus, to the street side where the driver's window was open. There, she thought she saw him throw something into the bus. She was still trying to peer through the tinted glass when people began stumbling out the rear door, choking and weeping. Gas.

Rye caught an old woman who would have fallen, lifted two little children down when they were in danger of being knocked down and trampled. She could see the bearded man helping people at the front door. She caught a thin old man shoved out by one of the combatants. Staggered by the old man's weight, she was barely able to get out of the way as the last of the young men pushed his way out. This one, bleeding from nose and mouth, stumbled into another, and they grappled blindly, still sobbing from the gas.

The bearded man helped the bus driver out through the front door, though the driver did not seem to appreciate his help. For a moment, Rye thought there would be another fight. The bearded man stepped back and watched the driver gesture threateningly, watched him shout in wordless anger.

The bearded man stood still, made no sound, refused to respond to clearly obscene gestures. The least impaired people tended to do this —stand back unless they were physically threatened and let those with less control scream and jump around. It was as though they felt it beneath them to be as touchy as the less comprehending. This was an attitude of superiority, and that was the way people like the bus driver perceived it. Such "superiority" was frequently punished by beatings, even by death. Rye had had close calls of her own. As a result, she never went unarmed. And in this world where the only likely common language was body language, being armed was often enough. She had rarely had to draw her gun or even display it.

The bearded man's revolver was on constant display. Apparently that was enough for the bus driver. The driver spat in disgust, glared at the bearded man for a moment longer, then strode back to his gas-filled bus. He stared at it for a moment, clearly wanting to get in, but the gas was still too strong. Of the windows, only his tiny driver's

window actually opened. The front door was open, but the rear door would not stay open unless someone held it. Of course, the air conditioning had failed long ago. The bus would take some time to clear. It was the driver's property, his livelihood. He had pasted old magazine pictures of items he would accept as fare on its sides. Then he would use what he collected to feed his family or to trade. If his bus did not run, he did not eat. On the other hand, if the inside of his bus was torn apart by senseless fighting, he would not eat very well either. He was apparently unable to perceive this. All he could see was that it would be some time before he could use his bus again. He shook his fist at the bearded man and shouted. There seemed to be words in his shout, but Rye could not understand them. She did not know whether this was his fault or hers. She had heard so little coherent human speech for the past three years, she was no longer certain how well she recognized it, no longer certain of the degree of her own impairment.

The bearded man sighed. He glanced toward his car, then beckoned to Rye. He was ready to leave, but he wanted something from her first. No. No, he wanted her to leave with him. Risk getting into his car when, in spite of his uniform, law and order were nothing—not even words any longer.

She shook her head in a universally understood negative, but the man continued to beckon.

She waved him away. He was doing what the less impaired rarely did—drawing potentially negative attention to another of his kind. People from the bus had begun to took at her.

One of the men who had been fighting tapped another on the arm, then pointed from the bearded man to Rye, and finally held up the first two fingers of his right hand as though giving two-thirds of a Boy Scout salute. The gesture was very quick, its meaning obvious even at a distance. She had been grouped with the bearded man. Now what?

The man who had made the gesture started toward her.

She had no idea what he intended, but she stood her ground. The man was half a foot taller than she was and perhaps ten years younger. She did not imagine she could outrun him. Nor did she expect anyone to help her if she needed help. The people around her were all strangers.

She gestured once—a clear indication to the man to stop. She did not intend to repeat the gesture. Fortunately, the man obeyed. He gestured obscenely and several other men laughed. Loss of verbal language had spawned a whole new set of obscene gestures. The man, with stark simplicity, had accused her of sex with the bearded man and had suggested she accommodate the other men present—beginning with him.

Rye watched him wearily. People might very well stand by and watch if he tried to rape her. They would also stand and watch her shoot him. Would he push things that far?

He did not. After a series of obscene gestures that brought him no closer to her, he turned contemptuously and walked away.

And the bearded man still waited. He had removed his service revolver, holster and all. He beckoned again, both hands empty. No doubt his gun was in the car and within easy reach, but his taking it off impressed her. Maybe he was all right. Maybe he was just alone. She had been alone herself for three years. The illness had stripped her, killing her children one by one, killing her husband, her sister, her parents….

The illness, if it was an illness, had cut even the living off from one another. As it swept over the country, people hardly had time to lay blame on the Soviets (though they were falling silent along with the rest of the world), on a new virus, a new pollutant, radiation, divine retribution…. The illness was stroke-swift in the way it cut people down and strokelike in some of its effects. But it was highly specific. Language was always lost or severely impaired. It was never regained. Often there was also paralysis, intellectual impairment, death.

Rye walked toward the bearded man, ignoring the whistling and applauding of two of the young men and their thumbs-up signs to the bearded man. If he had smiled at them or acknowledged them in any way, she would almost certainly have changed her mind. If she had let herself think of the possible deadly consequences of getting into a stranger's car, she would have changed her mind. Instead, she thought of the man who lived across the street from her. He rarely washed since his bout with the illness. And he had gotten into the habit of urinating wherever he happened to be. He had two women already—one tending each of his large gardens. They put up with him in exchange for his protection. He had made it clear that he wanted Rye to become his third woman.

She got into the car and the bearded man shut the door. She watched as he walked around to the driver's door—watched for his sake because his gun was on the seat beside her. And the bus driver and a pair of young men had come a few steps closer. They did nothing, though, until the bearded man was in the car. Then one of them threw a rock. Others followed his example, and as the car drove away, several rocks bounced off harmlessly.

When the bus was some distance behind them, Rye wiped sweat from her forehead and longed to relax. The bus would have taken her more than halfway to Pasadena. She would have had only ten miles to walk. She wondered how far she would have to walk now—and wondered if walking a long distance would be her only problem.

At Figuroa and Washington where the bus normally made a left turn, the bearded man stopped, looked at her, and indicated that she should choose a direction. When she directed him left and he actually turned left, she began to relax. If he was willing to go where she directed, perhaps he was safe.

As they passed blocks of burned, abandoned buildings, empty lots, and wrecked or stripped cars, he slipped a gold chain over his head and handed it to her. The pendant attached to it was a smooth, glassy, black rock. Obsidian. His name might be Rock or Peter or Black, but she decided to think of him as Obsidian. Even her sometimes useless memory would retain a name like Obsidian.

She handed him her own name symbol—a pin in the shape of a large golden stalk of wheat. She had bought it long before the illness and the silence began. Now she wore it, thinking it was as close as she was likely to come to Rye. People like Obsidian who had not known her before probably thought of her as Wheat. Not that it mattered. She would never hear her name spoken again.

Obsidian handed her pin back to her. He caught her hand as she reached for it and rubbed his thumb over her calluses.

He stopped at First Street and asked which way again. Then, after turning right as she had indicated, he parked near the Music Center. There, he took a folded paper from the dashboard and unfolded it. Rye recognized it as a street map, though the writing on it meant nothing to her. He flattened the map, took her hand again, and put her index finger on one spot. He touched her, touched himself, pointed toward the floor. In effect, “We are here.” She knew he wanted to know where she was going. She wanted to tell him, but she shook her head sadly. She had lost reading and writing. That was her most serious impairment and her most painful. She had taught history at UCLA. She had done freelance writing. Now she could not even read her own manuscripts. She had a houseful of books that she could neither read nor bring herself to use as fuel. And she had a memory that would not bring back to her much of what she had read before.

She stared at the map, trying to calculate. She had been born in Pasadena, had lived for fifteen years in Los Angeles. Now she was near L.A. Civic Center. She knew the relative positions of the two cities, knew streets, directions, even knew to stay away from freeways, which might be blocked by wrecked cars and destroyed overpasses. She ought to know how to point out Pasadena even though she could not recognize the word.

Hesitantly, she placed her hand over a pale orange patch in the upper right corner of the map. That should be right. Pasadena.

Obsidian lifted her hand and looked under it, then folded the map and put it back on the dashboard. He could read, she realized

belatedly. He could probably write, too. Abruptly, she hated him—deep, bitter hatred. What did literacy mean to him—a grown man who played cops and robbers? But he was literate and she was not. She never would be. She felt sick to her stomach with hatred, frustration, and jealousy. And only a few inches from her hand was a loaded gun.

She held herself still, staring at him, almost seeing his blood. But her rage crested and ebbed and she did nothing.

Obsidian reached for her hand with hesitant familiarity. She looked at him. Her face had already revealed too much. No person still living in what was left of human society could fail to recognize that expression, that jealousy.

She closed her eyes wearily, drew a deep breath. She had experienced longing for the past, hatred of the present, growing hopelessness, purposelessness, but she had never experienced such a powerful urge to kill another person. She had left her home, finally, because she had come near to killing herself. She had found no reason to stay alive. Perhaps that was why she had gotten into Obsidian's car. She had never before done such a thing.

He touched her mouth and made chatter motions with thumb and fingers. Could she speak?

She nodded and watched his milder envy come and go. Now both had admitted what it was not safe to admit, and there had been no violence. He tapped his mouth and forehead and shook his head. He did not speak or comprehend spoken language. The illness had played with them, taking away, she suspected, what each valued most.

She plucked at his sleeve, wondering why he had decided on his own to keep the LAPD alive with what he had left. He was sane enough otherwise. Why wasn't he at home raising corn, rabbits, and children? But she did not know how to ask. Then he put his hand on her thigh and she had another question to deal with.

She shook her head. Disease, pregnancy, helpless, solitary agony… no.

He massaged her thigh gently and smiled in obvious disbelief.

No one had touched her for three years. She had not wanted anyone to touch her. What kind of world was this to chance bringing a child into even if the father were willing to stay and help raise it? It was too bad, though. Obsidian could not know how attractive he was to her—young, probably younger than she was, clean, asking for what he wanted rather than demanding it. But none of that mattered. What were a few moments of pleasure measured against a lifetime of consequences?

He pulled her closer to him and for a moment she let herself enjoy the closeness. He smelled good—male and good. She pulled away

reluctantly.

He sighed, reached toward the glove compartment. She stiffened, not knowing what to expect, but all he took out was a small box. The writing on it meant nothing to her. She did not understand until he broke the seal, opened the box, and took out a condom. He looked at her, and she first looked away in surprise. Then she giggled. She could not remember when she had last giggled.

He grinned, gestured toward the backseat, and she laughed aloud. Even in her teens, she had disliked backseats of cars. But she looked around at the empty streets and ruined buildings, then she got out and into the backseat. He let her put the condom on him, then seemed surprised at her eagerness.

Sometime later, they sat together, covered by his coat, unwilling to become clothed near strangers again just yet. He made rock-the-baby gestures and looked questioningly at her.

She swallowed, shook her head. She did not know how to tell him her children were dead.

He took her hand and drew a cross in it with his index finger, then made his baby-rocking gesture again.

She nodded, held up three fingers, then turned away, trying to shut out a sudden flood of memories. She had told herself that the children growing up now were to be pitied. They would run through the downtown canyons with no real memory of what the buildings had been or even how they had come to be. Today's children gathered books as well as wood to be burned as fuel. They ran through the streets chasing one another and hooting like chimpanzees. They had no future. They were now all they would ever be.

He put his hand on her shoulder, and she turned suddenly, fumbling for his small box, then urging him to make love to her again. He could give her forgetfulness and pleasure. Until now, nothing had been able to do that. Until now, every day had brought her closer to the time when she would do what she had left home to avoid doing: putting her gun in her mouth and pulling the trigger.

She asked Obsidian if he would come home with her, stay with her.

He looked surprised and pleased once he understood. But he did not answer at once. Finally, he shook his head as she had feared he might. He was probably having too much fun playing cops and robbers and picking up women.

She dressed in silent disappointment, unable to feel any anger toward him. Perhaps he already had a wife and a home. That was likely. The illness had been harder on men than on women—had killed more men, had left male survivors more severely impaired.

Men like Obsidian were rare. Women either settled for less or stayed alone. If they found an Obsidian, they did what they could to keep him. Rye suspected he had someone younger, prettier keeping him.

He touched her while she was strapping her gun on and asked with a complicated series of gestures whether it was loaded.

She nodded grimly.

He patted her arm.

She asked once more if he would come home with her, this time using a different series of gestures. He had seemed hesitant. Perhaps he could be courted.

He got out and into the front seat without responding.

She took her place in front again, watching him. Now he plucked at his uniform and looked at her. She thought she was being asked something but did not know what it was.

He took off his badge, tapped it with one finger, then tapped his chest. Of course.

She took the badge from his hand and pinned her wheat stalk to it. If playing cops and robbers was his only insanity, let him play. She would take him, uniform and all. It occurred to her that she might eventually lose him to someone he would meet as he had met her. But she would have him for a while.

He took the street map down again, tapped it, pointed vaguely northeast toward Pasadena, then looked at her.

She shrugged, tapped his shoulder, then her own, and held up her index and second fingers tight together, just to be sure.

He grasped the two fingers and nodded. He was with her.

She took the map from him and threw it onto the dashboard. She pointed back southwest—back toward home. Now she did not have to go to Pasadena. Now she could go on having a brother there and two nephews—three right-handed males. Now she did not have to find out for certain whether she was as alone as she feared. Now she was not alone.

Obsidian took Hill Street south, then Washington west, and she leaned back, wondering what it would be like to have someone again. With what she had scavenged, what she had preserved, and what she grew, there was easily enough food for them. There was certainly room enough in a four-bedroom house. He could move his possessions in. Best of all, the animal across the street would pull back and possibly not force her to kill him.

Obsidian had drawn her closer to him, and she had put her head on his shoulder when suddenly he braked hard, almost throwing her off the seat. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that someone had run across the street in front of the car. One car on the street and someone had to run in front of it.

Straightening up, Rye saw that the runner was a woman, fleeing from an old frame house to a boarded-up storefront. She ran silently, but the man who followed her a moment later shouted what sounded like garbled words as he ran. He had something in his hand. Not a gun. A knife, perhaps.

The woman tried a door, found it locked, looked around desperately, finally snatched up a fragment of glass broken from the storefront window. With this she turned to face her pursuer. Rye thought she would be more likely to cut her own hand than to hurt anyone else with the glass.

Obsidian jumped from the car, shouting. It was the first time Rye had heard his voice—deep and hoarse from disuse. He made the same sound over and over the way some speechless people did, "Da, da, da!"

Rye got out of the car as Obsidian ran toward the couple. He had drawn his gun. Fearful, she drew her own and released the safety. She looked around to see who else might be attracted to the scene. She saw the man glance at Obsidian, then suddenly lunge at the woman. The woman jabbed his face with her glass, but he caught her arm and managed to stab her twice before Obsidian shot him.

The man doubled, then toppled, clutching his abdomen. Obsidian shouted, then gestured Rye over to help the woman.

Rye moved to the woman's side, remembering that she had little more than bandages and antiseptic in her pack. But the woman was beyond help. She had been stabbed with a long, slender boning knife.

She touched Obsidian to let him know the woman was dead. He had bent to check the wounded man who lay still and also seemed dead. But as Obsidian looked around to see what Rye wanted, the man opened his eyes. Face contorted, he seized Obsidian's just-holstered revolver and fired. The bullet caught Obsidian in the temple and he collapsed.

It happened just that simply, just that fast. An instant later, Rye shot the wounded man as he was turning the gun on her.

And Rye was alone—with three corpses.

She knelt beside Obsidian, dry-eyed, frowning, trying to understand why everything had suddenly changed. Obsidian was gone. He had died and left her—like everyone else.

Two very small children came out of the house from which the man and woman had run—a boy and girl perhaps three years old. Holding hands, they crossed the street toward Rye. They stared at her, then edged past her and went to the dead woman. The girl shook the woman's arm as though trying to wake her.

This was too much. Rye got up, feeling sick to her stomach with grief and anger. If the children began to cry, she thought she would

vomit.

They were on their own, those two kids. They were old enough to scavenge. She did not need any more grief. She did not need a stranger's children who would grow up to be hairless chimps.

She went back to the car. She could drive home, at least. She remembered how to drive.

The thought that Obsidian should be buried occurred to her before she reached the car, and she did vomit.

She had found and lost the man so quickly. It was as though she had been snatched from comfort and security and given a sudden, inexplicable beating. Her head would not clear. She could not think.

Somehow, she made herself go back to him, look at him. She found herself on her knees beside him with no memory of having knelt. She stroked his face, his beard. One of the children made a noise and she looked at them, at the woman who was probably their mother. The children looked back at her, obviously frightened. Perhaps it was their fear that reached her finally.

She had been about to drive away and leave them. She had almost done it, almost left two toddlers to die. Surely there had been enough dying. She would have to take the children home with her. She would not be able to live with any other decision. She looked around for a place to bury three bodies. Or two. She wondered if the murderer were the children's father. Before the silence, the police had always said some of the most dangerous calls they went out on were domestic disturbance calls. Obsidian should have known that—not that the knowledge would have kept him in the car. It would not have held her back either. She could not have watched the woman murdered and done nothing.

She dragged Obsidian toward the car. She had nothing to dig with her, and no one to guard for her while she dug. Better to take the bodies with her and bury them next to her husband and her children. Obsidian would come home with her after all.

When she had gotten him onto the floor in the back, she returned for the woman. The little girl, thin, dirty, solemn, stood up and unknowingly gave Rye a gift. As Rye began to drag the woman by her arms, the little girl screamed, "No!"

Rye dropped the woman and stared at the girl.

"No!" the girl repeated. She came to stand beside the woman. "Go away!" she told Rye.

"Don't talk," the little boy said to her. There was no blurring or confusing of sounds. Both children had spoken and Rye had understood. The boy looked at the dead murderer and moved further from him. He took the girl's hand. "Be quiet," he whispered.

Fluent speech! Had the woman died because she could talk and

had taught her children to talk? Had she been killed by a husband's festering anger or by a stranger's jealous rage? And the children… they must have been born after the silence. Had the disease run its course, then? Or were these children simply immune? Certainly they had had time to fall sick and silent. Rye's mind leaped ahead. What if children of three or fewer years were safe and able to learn language? What if all they needed were teachers? Teachers and protectors.

Rye glanced at the dead murderer. To her shame, she thought she could understand some of the passions that must have driven him, whomever he was. Anger, frustration, hopelessness, insane jealousy… how many more of him were there—people willing to destroy what they could not have?

Obsidian had been the protector, had chosen that role for who knew what reason. Perhaps putting on an obsolete uniform and patrolling the empty streets had been what he did instead of putting a gun into his mouth. And now that there was something worth protecting, he was gone.

She had been a teacher. A good one. She had been a protector, too, though only of herself. She had kept herself alive when she had no reason to live. If the illness let these children alone, she could keep them alive.

Somehow she lifted the dead woman into her arms and placed her on the backseat of the car. The children began to cry, but she knelt on the broken pavement and whispered to them, fearful of frightening them with the harshness of her long unused voice.

"It's all right," she told them. "You're going with us, too. Come on." She lifted them both, one in each arm. They were so light. Had they been getting enough to eat?

The boy covered her mouth with his hand, but she moved her face away. "It's all right for me to talk," she told him. "As long as no one's around, it's all right." She put the boy down on the front seat of the car and he moved over without being told to, to make room for the girl. When they were both in the car, Rye leaned against the window, looking at them, seeing that they were less afraid now, that they watched her with at least as much curiosity as fear.

"I'm Valerie Rye," she said, savoring the words. "It's all right for you to talk to me."

Octavia Estelle Butler

Vonda N. McIntyre

Estelle was rather shy and quiet and she towered over me. Our rooms were next to each other, in the first co-ed dorm in the history of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. About twenty young writers, including Estelle and me, had gathered at Clarion State College in Clarion, Pennsylvania, for the 1970 Clarion Writers Workshop. It was the third (and last) original Clarion, based on Damon Knight and Kate Wilhelm's Milford, invented and run by Robin Scott Wilson.

Our instructors included Robin, Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delany, Fritz Leiber, Harlan Ellison, Kate Wilhelm, and Damon Knight. Other writers and editors dropped in: James Sallis, Gardner R. Dozois, Edward Bryant, David G. Hartwell.

Estelle and I had arrived by completely different paths. The common factor was Harlan. Estelle's gateway was Harlan's screenwriting class in Los Angeles. He recognized in Estelle a talented prose writer and encouraged her to attend Clarion.

My gateway was an SF convention where I attended a panel on the Clarion Workshop. Clarion was quite controversial in the SF community, for reasons that I never understood. The people who objected loudly to it at the panel had never been within a hundred miles of it, as far as I could make out. If memory serves, Harlan wasn't on the panel itself, but commented from the floor.

The workshop sounded wonderful to me.

I had taken a single creative writing class in college, to give myself an excuse to spend time writing, among the calculus and physical chemistry. I gave up Creative Writing classes after one quarter and a professor who handed back my SF story (pinching it carefully by one corner so as not to be covered in scifi cooties) saying:

"When are you going to write some *real* stuff?"

He wanted us to write like Hemingway about war and barroom brawls. This was pretty silly considering that at the time nobody under 21 was allowed into a bar in Washington State, women weren't allowed in combat, and the men were hoping to stay out of Viet Nam.

All of us arrived at Clarion knowing that science fiction and

fantasy would qualify as "*real* stuff" even if it wasn't realistic fiction.

In a class that included George Alec Effinger, Robert Thurston, David J. Skal, and Glen Cook (Robin's assistant that summer)—Estelle was a star. When she turned in her first story, we all realized that we were reading the work of a major writer.

She was also a perceptive and kind critic, a quality that carried over into her teaching.

Estelle was a serious morning person and I'm a night owl. She never complained when I started typing along about the time she went to sleep. The Clarion State College dorms were built of cinderblock, and carried the sound of typing quite efficiently—even the tape-loop typing of one student who, we discovered later, would put the loop on his reel-to-reel recorder, set it running, and take a nap. But he was in the half of the corridor that was supposed to be restricted to men, so the tape loop didn't bother the women overmuch when we were trying to work or sleep.

We got together to talk in whatever room we pleased, as the house mother who made the rules was apparently afraid to come into our section of the dorm.

It was some years later that I found out Estelle had been able to hear my late-night typing, in the context of her hoping that *her* early-morning typing hadn't kept *me* awake.

She maintained her early-morning pattern all her life. At the beginning of her career, at the time when new writers all have day jobs to support their writing, she deliberately took jobs that put no claim on her thoughts, that would let her think about her stories while working. But jobs such as working in a laundry are physically exhausting, so she would go to sleep early, wake up at zero dawn thirty, and write until it was time to go to the day job again.

After a few years, when her career began to take off, Octavia—she switched from her middle name to her byline—overcame her shyness to branch out into speaking engagements. She took to it: she had an authoritative voice and a compelling presence. She spoke her mind and enthralled audiences. The speaking engagements had a salutary effect on her bank account and allowed her to stop taking menial jobs.

The MacArthur grant she won in 1995 gave her financial stability and allowed her to move from Pasadena to Seattle, where the climate was more to her taste. In an amusing coincidence, the house she bought in Lake City was across Lake City Way from a place I had lived twenty years before.

We got to see each other more often after she moved, crossing paths at the monthly gathering of the local SF community and at Clarion West parties, attending plays and movies, searching out vegetarian and, later, vegan restaurants. Her blood pressure troubled

her and she hoped a vegan or vegetarian regime would help.

And she was right to be troubled. The terrible news of her death came in February of 2006. I heard of it at the small SF convention Potlatch, where we were all expecting to see her.

She had been taking blood pressure medicine that made it difficult for her to write, which also troubled her.

She was a bit embarrassed about her fondness for vampire novels, but found in them the inspiration to write her own vampire novel. She thought it was a bit lighter than her Patternist or Xenogenesis or Parable novels, or, of course, *Kindred,* but in *Fledgling* she created a vampire novel unlike any other vampire novel ever written. *Fledgling* came out only a few months before her death, to considerable success and acclaim.

She had been thinking of writing a sequel. I miss knowing what that book would have been.

But not as much as I miss Octavia.

My Love Will Never Die

Christopher Caldwell

He had whisky eyes—Kentucky bourbon, really—I felt a little drunk whenever he looked at me. People use the words magnetic and hypnotic to describe eyes like those, but that doesn't fit; it was more like they had their own gravity. When his gaze was on you, it felt like it had weight.

I wanted him.

He strolled liquid-smooth into the travel agency where I worked. The little bell above the door jingled in time with the swing of his arms and the gentle sway of his narrow hips. It was only an hour after lunch, but he made me hungry. His skin was the color of grocery-store caramels, the kind that come in bulk and are almost irresistible; even people who'd never think of stealing can't help popping one or two into their mouths. When he came over to my desk, I found myself short of breath and shivering despite the summer heat.

"I was wondering if you could help me. I need to arrange a last minute trip for a large group, and I'm afraid I'm hopeless at this sort of thing." He flashed me a quick, nervous smile as he settled into a chair across from me. I felt dazed.

"Uh, yeah. Certainly, sir." Never before had the cheerful façade I adopt as a travel agent felt so false. "Welcome to the Prescott Travel Agency. Taking the worry out of all your travel planning for business or leisure is what we're here for!" *Lame*.

"This is very last minute." He had a faint accent. I couldn't place it. "I need plane tickets and hotel rooms for a party of fifteen. We're going to New Orleans."

I jerked open my junk drawer. I pretended it didn't hurt when I slammed it into my knee. I cursed under my breath as I knocked over the bottle of sunblock I used to keep my complexion peaches-and-cream instead of boiled lobster; the cap wasn't screwed on right, and thick liquid pooled in the bottom of the drawer. I rifled through the files until I came to New Orleans. I pulled out a stack of brochures that spilled over the top of my desk in a multi-colored mess.

"Beautiful," he said. He was not looking at the brochures. "I knew I

was in the right place."

My face tingled from blushing. So much for not looking like a boiled lobster. "So, Mr.—"

"Bienamie. But please, please call me Etienne." He leaned over my desk to read the tiny print on my business cards. He smelled like burnt sugar. "Mr. Lawrence?"

"Ray."

"Ray." His hand rested on a brochure extolling the virtues of hotels in the French Quarter. It was so close to mine that I could feel his body heat.

"So, Mr. Bienamie—er, Etienne—when are you and your group planning on leaving, and for how long?" I logged into our scheduling database and punched New Orleans into the relevant field.

"We need to leave next Tuesday evening. We'll be there through that Sunday."

"Okay, any idea on the price range?"

"Money isn't really a problem. We'd like comfortable accommodations, and if they're a little on the expensive side I'm sure we can cope."

We discussed travel options. I forgot to go for the hard sell and offered a more than fair luxury package. He put the whole thing on a single platinum credit card. I had to punch in the numbers twice. My hands were shaking.

"You've been very helpful," he said, leaning back into his chair. "I'd like to take your card so that I can keep in touch. I mean, should another travel need arise suddenly."

I pulled out one of my cards and scrawled my home number across the back. He glanced down at the number, raised an eyebrow, and smiled as if he'd been expecting it.

∞

My phone began to ring only minutes after I'd stepped through the door. I was grimy and gritty from the ride home on the Light Rail; the air conditioning had failed, and I'd spent most of the ride pressed up against a woman who smelled like garlic and feet. I picked up the receiver on the third ring, mentally steeling myself to insult the mother of the telemarketer I assumed was on the other end.

"What?" I answered.

"Is this Ray?" A honey-smooth voice with a hint of an accent I couldn't place.

"Uh, hi. Yeah, this is Ray. Is this Etienne?"

He laughed. "You guessed." He certainly didn't follow rules. He hadn't waited three days to call me. He didn't even try to sound disinterested. "I was wondering if you had any plans for dinner this

evening. And if you didn't, I was wondering if you'd like to join me."

"I'm not really doing anything." I sounded too eager. "Sure, sounds great. What time?"

"Is an hour from now too early?"

I sniffed one of my armpits. *Yes.* "Oh no, not at all. I'll just change out of my work clothes."

"Do you want to meet up? Or I can pick you up, if you'd like."

I gave him my address before I could think.

"Perfect. I'll be there in about forty-five minutes."

∞

After dinner, I invited him home for mojitos and conversation. I hated my tiny kitchen. I hated its pink tiled walls. It was so small that two people standing chest-to-chest filled up most of the available floor space. I expected Etienne to stay in the living room while I made us drinks, but he followed me in. He leaned in the doorway and watched as I pulled out my two favorite tumblers, blue mosaic glass with pleasingly nubbly surfaces. I turned my back to him to get a glass pitcher, but the entire time I felt clumsy, feverish and dizzy. He watched me muddle the mint and sugar. He closed his eyes and inhaled the sweet, sticky smell. I poured in the measures of rum and he said, "Drinking sometimes makes me dangerous; I'm warning you."

"Maybe I should down the whole pitcher for the greater good, then?"

"I think that you like a little danger."

I laughed nervously and then pushed past him with the pitcher and pair of glasses. His hand brushed my waist. I poured him a mojito and thrust it forward clumsily. Liquid sloshed onto the hardwood floor. I poured myself one. He lifted his glass in cheers, threw his head back, and swallowed most of his first mojito in a single wolfish gulp.

I sipped at mine. "These are strong. You don't mess around."

"I believe in going after what I want."

"I don't know what I want, yet."

He kissed me. It was abrupt and we both pulled away almost immediately. I sucked in a sharp breath between my teeth. He looked at me with half-lidded eyes. His lips parted. I kissed him. This time was longer and harder. His teeth crushed against my lips. He pulled back again. He looked at me with something like concern. "We don't have to."

"No," I said. "We can stop this. Maybe you should go home."

"Maybe," he said half-heartedly. Then, "Do you like me, Raymond?"

“Do you have to ask?” I replied incredulously.

“No, I mean, really like me.”

“Do you have to ask?” I said, softer this time.

He kissed me again. I wrapped my arms around him.

“We can still stop.”

I sighed. “Don’t do anything you’ll regret.”

“No,” he said, and kissed me again. He unbuttoned my shirt. I fumbled with his belt buckle.

“Do you want to—” he began.

“Yes,” I said, “yes.”

∞

This is imperfect, I thought. He lay in my bed asleep, his cheek on my pillow. His limbs stretched out gracelessly. He took up so much more space than I would have thought. His shirt was crumpled on my floor. It wasn’t moonlight that beamed down upon his lovely naked form, but rather the harsh orange-yellow glow of the streetlamp, filtered through my cheap venetian blinds.

A half-finished mojito from earlier in the night sat on the dresser. His. I slugged it down. It was warm, and the sugar had settled in the bottom of the glass. It felt thick on my tongue. A bit of mint stuck between my teeth. I sighed and he stirred then settled again, breathing slow and deep. I walked into the bathroom, bared my teeth at the mirror, and picked out the piece of mint.

My alarm went off.

He called for me from the other room, his voice thick with sleep. I walked over, sat on the edge of the bed and turned off the alarm. He reached for me. I leaned back into him. I smelled the alcohol on his breath and in his sweat. He nuzzled my neck. The bristle on his chin scratched me, and I wanted to pull away but didn’t. He said, “Ray, I have to get going. I want to stay but—”

“I know,” I said. “This wasn’t supposed to happen anyway.” I pulled away from him a little. My chest felt tight. I turned to him and managed to smile weakly. It wasn’t a convincing smile at all.

“I don’t regret what happened. I like you.” He put his hand on my shoulder. I shuddered at the closeness of him. He took his hand away.

“I like you, Etienne. I like you a lot. I wanted this to happen—I did. It’s just that everything’s so complicated for me right now.”

He drew back a little, took my face in his hands and gazed into my eyes. His expression was earnest and sweet and boyishly concerned. I wanted to turn away from him, I wanted to avert my eyes, but he would not let me. I felt like I would break under the weight of that gaze.

“We will see each other when I return from New Orleans.”

∞

I saw him almost every day after he came back. My pillows smelled like burnt sugar. I found myself daydreaming about the black silk luster of his hair and those intoxicating gold-brown eyes. After six weeks I gave him a key to my apartment. I’d never given anyone a key to my apartment.

One night, I came home from work to find Etienne in my kitchen cooking gumbo for dinner. The smell of spices made my mouth water. When he saw me, he smiled and filled a bowl full of hot rice and ladled out the gumbo over it. He got a couple of beers from the fridge and a small jar of filé. He said, “You just sprinkle a little over it. It thickens it a little and improves the flavor.”

I did, and he was right. The spicy andouille sausage made my mouth tingle a little, and I probably drank more beer than I was used to. I felt heady and reckless. I watched him pop a plump, tender, pink shrimp between his plump, tender, pink lips and I blurted out, “I love you.”

I had never said that to anyone before. He smiled and put his hand on top of mine. He said, “I love you too.”

“I don’t know what this means, yet.”

He laughed. “What it means, my darling Raymond, is that you will always be mine. Always.”

It was over ninety that afternoon, but I shivered.

∞

The next night I went to Griffith Park. I walked through the tunnels beneath the observatory to a place where the branches in the trees arched overhead to blot out the stars and the city lights. I followed a broken path through the underbrush to a place where the men waited in lines and sized each other up. It smelled like musk and piss and decaying leaves. Juniper berries crunched underfoot. The sharp, pungent smell reminded me of well gin and tonics.

A lean, sullen Latino nodded at me. He was unshaven and scruffy but handsome enough. He was more than handsome enough for what I wanted. A thin, pale scar ran along the line of his chin. He licked his lips, and I followed him through underbrush to a hollowed out place beneath an evergreen oak. He gripped my shoulders. His hands were rough, and I could feel the calluses through the thin cotton of my polo shirt.

“Don’t see too many pretty blond things like you down here lookin’ for trade.” He ran his tongue over his teeth. One of his incisors was

blackened and dead.

"I'm not most pretty blond things."

"You come here to get punished?" He unzipped his jeans and leaned back.

I sank to my knees.

∞

Etienne was not in my apartment when I got back. But the fragrance of burnt sugar lingered in the air. He had been there.

My cheeks were hot and my lips felt swollen. The hems of my jeans stank of mud. I had raised, red, angry-looking welts on my arms where tiny things had bitten me. There was grass in my hair. I put my face in my hands. They smelled like sweat and pond water, and a little like bleach.

I sat on the rim of the tub and ran the shower for a long time before finally stepping into the veil of steaming water.

Without bothering to dry off or get dressed, I dripped into the living room and picked up the phone. Lisa, my boss at Prescott, was speed dial #3.

Without preamble I blurted, "Lisa, you know that favor you say you owe me? The super big one?"

"Ray?" She drawled out the vowel in my name. "It's after midnight. I don't think—"

"I know. But I'm calling it in. You know that little island that you loved so much? I need to go there."

"Now? Ray, are you in trouble? I know people—"

"Not now. But soon. It's not trouble, but I need to just go away for a while. Can you help me?"

"Of course I can."

∞

"I just need time away." My voice echoed back at me, distorted and whiny. I hate cell phones.

"But I don't understand." Etienne's voice was smooth even when he was upset. "Why didn't you talk to me about this?"

"I just couldn't. I don't expect it to make sense. Just please accept it. I still love you."

"Where are you?" His concern was so convincing.

"I'm at the airport. It's too late to talk me out of this."

"Why are you doing this?" His voice was mild.

"Because when I'm around you I don't think straight. I don't make the right decisions."

"I'm the wrong decision?"

"I don't know. I need to go away and find out."

"Tell me where you're going. At least give me that much."

"No." I clenched my fists. "No. This has to be this way. If you love me, you've got to understand."

"Ray. Ray? Don't you know that you'll always be mine? Don't you know that?"

I hit the end button.

Always? We'll see.

∞

I rented a little colonial house on the island. There were no screens in the windows, only shutters to close against storms. But the bed came with mosquito netting, and the landlady left me several orange candles to keep away bugs. The beautiful, brown island boys all pretended to be macho in the day, but some of them came calling in the night for secretive love-making. They mostly liked to do it outside, in the mango groves.

I biked into the town for bread and fruit. Sometimes I stopped at brightly colored market stalls for bundles of roasted meat and rice wrapped in banana leaves. I'd greedily unwrap them and try to devour them hot off the grill. So hot that I'd burn my fingers and I'd stick them into my mouth and suck at the savory juices.

I tried not to think about Etienne.

But the dreams started. Two nights after I arrived on the island I had the first one. I was back in my own my kitchen. But the scale of everything was wrong; the countertops were higher than my head, the ceiling lost in shadows. All the angles were off, sharper than they should have been. Shadows moved independently of the light. The tiles on the walls were the same oozing pink as underdone pork loin; they seemed to pulse slowly in the flickering lights. I looked down at my hands; the skin turned gray and began to crack and peel, the flesh beneath a dull, dark red. I looked up again, and Etienne towered over me. He must have been eight feet tall. His face seemed carved out of polished wood. His voice rumbled from somewhere, reverberating through my bones though his mouth did not move. "Come back to me."

I sat upright—the mosquito netting scratched my face—and stared into the gloomy corners of the room. There was no one there.

The next morning I went to the beach and swam for a while in the clear, bracing water. Afterwards, I lay in the hot, powdery sand and stared up at the vast expanse of sky. I thought about how it stretched above, beyond the horizon, never touching down on the land below. I wanted to be the sky.

That night I dreamt about him again. The dream began the same,

but this time when I turned to run I couldn't. Without moving its lips, the towering mask-face said, "Raymond, you must return to me. You are being foolish. Don't you know what *always* means? Come home."

I woke up and shouted "No!" to an empty room.

That day it rained. I stayed in the little house and read Jane Austen by hurricane lamp. The rain beat out a tribal tattoo on the tin roof. The palm trees rustled and swayed with the wind. None of the island boys knocked on my door.

In that night's dream, Etienne's bourbon-colored eyes smoldered from behind his mask-face. There was a smoky intensity to them that frightened me. He said, "Why do you force my hand? Don't you know I love you? Come back to me!"

"I can't!" I cried. I wanted to run away. My limbs were disobedient and weightless. I tried to turn my head, but I was fascinated by his gaze.

He advanced on me steadily with the slow, inexorable pacing of the bogeyman. My kitchen rippled and ran; the pink, oozing tiles pooled in rivulets. Then, somehow I was back in my island room, trapped in my bed with Etienne still advancing towards me. With his left hand he ripped the mosquito netting to pieces. He stared at me. Tears welled up in his eyes; his face was no longer a mask. He blew me a kiss with his right hand. It felt like being slapped.

When I woke up the next morning, my face was covered in a gritty, white powder. I got up and took a shower and washed it away. My joints felt stiff and I was tired. There was a little red nick on my cheek, but I chalked it up to an insect bite and ignored it.

The mosquito netting lay on the floor in a ragged heap.

∞

I decided to go to the bar that night. A wooden sign above the door says it's Callisto's Cantina, but everyone local just calls it Ed's. Ed is the bartender. He's a Vietnam vet who moved here in the eighties after a disability settlement. He always tried to get me to go with him to the only whorehouse in town, said he could get us a discount on the prettiest girls. I just laughed and changed the subject. I figured it was better not to mention my disinterest in the ladies; Ed might have charged me more for drinks. I didn't feel very well that night. When I came in he said, "You're looking real pale, Kiddo. Maybe you need to get your pickle wet? Good-looking kid like you will go blind if you keep it all for Rosie Palms and her five sisters."

"You're a braver man than I am. I'm waiting for the right one."

Ed leered. "Y'can have a sample of more'n a couple of right ones for less than two hundred bucks."

"I'll take your word for it. Gin and tonic, please."

“Just sayin’” Ed grunted as he pulled a bottle of Bombay Sapphire off the shelf behind him. “You ain’t gonna be so good lookin’ if you grow hair on them palms.”

I took a sip from my drink. My hands trembled. I gripped the bar for support. My knuckles were white. I gasped like a fish. Ed wheeled on me and barked, “You alright?”

I toppled over and fell onto the floor. My precious drink crashed down next to me and spilled out into the earth. My chest shuddered and then lay still. Ed shouted, “Someone get Doctor Camille!”

One of the local boys barreled out of the bar. Ed leaned over me, shook me by the shoulders, then gripped the side of my neck. He said, “Shit!” and then cracked his knuckles. He leaned my head back and reached into my mouth to sweep out anything lodged in there. He blew two quick, hard breaths into my mouth. I felt my chest expand. It was painful.

Ed laced his hairy, bearlike paws together and pressed them to my chest. He pushed down hard. The pressure was awful. I heard a sound like tree branches snapping in the wind. It was my ribs. Ed counted out, “one and two and three and four…” and pressed down hard on my chest on each number. Jagged, sharp little bits ripped into me. At the end of his count, Ed leaned my head back and blew two quick breaths into my mouth again. My stomach roiled and my gorge rose unbidden. On the second breath, I vomited onto Ed’s face.

“Fuck!” He wiped his face clear with the back of his arm and went back to pressing down on my chest.

After several sets of breaths and compressions, Doctor Camille burst into the bar, breathless. She waved at Ed to move away. Camille knelt down next to me. She felt my wrist for a pulse. She took out a stethoscope from her bag and listened to my chest. She looked up at Ed and asked, “How long have you been doing CPR?”

“A little more’n twenty minutes.”

Camille said, “His heart’s not beating. See the purply-red color on the back of his neck? He’s gone livid. CPR’s no use to him anymore. Poor kid. He died so young.”

I tried to scream that I wasn’t dead, but I couldn’t even whimper. Ed sighed. “He was a good kid. What do I do with the body?”

“Well, people around here are suspicious of corpses. I’d suggest you have it cremated so they don’t think he’ll spread the plague.”

I imagined being shut in the oven, able to feel the flames as well as I could feel the floor beneath me now. I would roast alive unless I could manage to move or scream or something. But still my body betrayed me and didn’t even twitch.

Ed said, “I think he was a Jew. Those people don’t like being burnt.”

“Suit yourself. Look, I’ve got a birth to attend to. Are you okay here? Want me to see if I can find a Rabbi?”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry, Camille, I’ll try’n take care of this mess. I’ll make some calls.”

I wasn’t Jewish. But I was thankful to Ed for not giving my body over to be burnt. A fly walked over my eyeball. It tickled. I couldn’t laugh. He made some calls from the rotary phone in the back of the bar. I couldn’t hear what he was saying. Ed came back over to me, clucked his tongue, and went through my pockets. He took my wallet.

Four young men showed up with a graying, tattered sheet. I recognized one of them from a tryst in the mango groves. They picked me up and wrapped me in the sheet. I couldn’t see anything and sound was muffled. One of them said, “You want this boy to have a marker on his grave?”

“I didn’t even know his name,” Ed said.

∞

They carried me out. One of them hummed a low, sad song. They shoved me into a box. My tailbone hurt where it hit the bottom. I think the box was pine. I could smell the resin. I heard a lid sliding over the top. I tried again to scream, to twitch, to cry out. But there was only the sound of a hammer hitting nails.

They lowered me into the ground. I could smell the loam. I could hear the clunk of the shovels digging into the earth and feel the casket rock a little each time the dirt hit the lid. The wood began to creak and whine. It made sounds like logs cracking over a fire. Dirt found cracks and splits and sprinkled over my sheet. It was cool. Things wriggled in the dirt. Feelers searched for exposed skin. Tiny legs crawled over me. I felt a sharp pinch at the back of my knee. Pincers dug into the soft flesh there and in my armpits. Something loathsome and long tried to wriggle inside my ear.

There was only darkness. Unless you have been in caves without a guiding light, you have never been anywhere the dark is so complete. Even in the darkest places your eyes adjust to make out shapes and forms and the hint of color. Under the earth there are no shapes, no forms and no colors. But there was the sound of cracking wood, the dense smell of soil, and the awful, feathery feel of questing antennae and clicking pincers searching for tender flesh. The bites were almost a relief; the things stopped moving while they fed.

∞

I don’t know how long I spent down there with the darkness and the

moans of wood bending under the weight of the earth and the sinister, scrabbling sounds of hungry creatures. But soon I heard something else. It was the sound of digging. It was steady and grew louder as time passed. There was a loud whack and I felt my casket shake as the shovel hit its lid. The shovel sounds and the scraping sounds increased feverishly as the digger began to move away the earth covering me. There was a sudden crack of splintering wood. Cool night air rushed into the small space that had been my world. I ached in all the places that many-legged things had torn into skin. Strong hands ripped away the shroud covering my eyes. The moon was full and huge and seemed bright as the sun.

Backlit by the swollen beaten-brass moon, staring down into my grave, stood Etienne. He was beautiful, of course. Around him were the four men who had buried me. Each one had a shovel in his hand. They stared at him with awe, but he only looked at me.

"Rise," he said. And my body began to twitch at his command. He said once more, "Rise." And I scrabbled up the sides of the grave and lurched towards him with shambling, unsteady steps. He brushed his hand across my cheek. His touch was gentle. His skin was warm. I saw no malice in his eyes. He shook his head at me and said, "I told you that you would always be mine. *Always*. Come with me now."

And I followed him. There is no such place as away for me anymore.

Falling into the Earth

Shweta Narayan

1. Foundling

The king her father found her in a furrow, so the story goes, and named her after it. Sita, daughter of the Earth.

Sita: a place where seed is planted.

§

Mama and Papa have talked about your adoption so often you dream of it; wailing in the agency doctor's huge dark arms while Mama and Papa sort through the papers and the bill. (American dollars only, *Ayah* says.) The room is pale yellow and it smells of disinfectant, like bathrooms in the morning. A tube light flickers silver in Mama's hair. Papa counts out dull green notes. Lots of them.

You fall, dream-soft, into Mama's arms, and are caught in a yellowing photograph: pale against her pink sari, her arms gently pulling you close, supporting your neck with one hand. Papa was an obstetrician and Mama a pediatrician; they both know how to hold babies.

"Our own foundling," says Papa, beaming. Your black hair is vivid against Mama's grey. You are nothing like the red-faced bald babies he delivered in America. "Our Sita."

§

Ayah adds that you're a black market baby. She has been with the family for long enough to say these things. You should always be grateful for it, she says while she brushes out your hair, because you were born to the sort that gives a child up for adoption. Maybe even an unmarried mother, like in *Aradhana*.

Here, you're a princess.

Ayah doesn't have to tell you to sit still while she tugs through the tangles; gratitude means being that princess, playing her role. Mama is too frail for disappointments.

You dream of falling into dark earth soft as Mama's arms.

2. Swayamvara

Sita's father held a competition when she came of age, a grand event to which all her hopeful suitors were invited. The princes and kings, great archers all, were challenged to string a bow infused with divine power.

Perhaps Rama and Sita met in secret and fell in love, and she prayed for him to succeed. Perhaps she prayed for the perfect man.

Perhaps he was just strong.

After every other man strained to lift the bow a finger's width, struggled, and gave up, Rama picked it up one-handed and strung it. He drew back the string, and broke the bow in two.

§

Arranged marriages are not so very arranged these days. Mama doesn't want you on anything as vulgar as a marriage website, but you get to choose your groom from the eligible boys that she and Papa's cousins know.

The first boy won't stop bragging. The second only wants to know what you can cook. The third is engaging till you tell him your degree is in performance arts. Then he says, "I thought you went to a real college."

You dream of running from princes armed with ladles and calculators, of pulling banana leaves over yourself and hiding in damp, summer-smelling earth.

Ram's auspicious name brings you out of hiding. His statistics are encouraging: MBA, in charge of his father's restaurants in California, green card holder.

Emailed pictures tell you he's tall, with an easy smile and Bollywood charm. The hint of grey over his ears adds distinction. He's wearing a *kurta,* blue-green as banyan leaves, over jeans. The photos do look a bit lightened, but darkness hardly matters in a man. You wonder what he makes of your pictures, whether he'll get in touch. You wonder how American he is.

He emails.

He asks what you think about the different dance forms you've studied. He says he's glad you wear traditional clothes; nothing can match their elegance. He asks if you'd be willing to leave Mama and Papa behind to go into exile with him; to come home, as they did, only in old age. He doesn't ask if you can cook.

You talk on the phone. His low voice, his foreign vowels, make

your toes curl.

You're scared of a decision made too soon, and he'll agree to wait. But Mama and Papa are old now, stooped and translucent, and Mama says plaintively that she wants to hold a grandchild before she dies. And how, after all, could Ram and Sita go wrong? He flies in for a visit.

At dinner, you talk over candlelight. He tells stories that make you laugh and grins when you do: "*Arrey*, she threatened to sue because she thought the chili was a tomato!" Candle shadows dance across his face. "We're not entirely *pakka*; one of our best cooks is Pakistani. But the only thing he terrorizes is the paneer. He's a good guy actually."

You've set a date before the candles sputter out.

Wedding preparations whirl you through the next months; they set you down on the divan three days before the wedding, with henna-covered hands stretched into a patch of hot sunlight and time, finally, to fret. The swirling patterns smell of wet earth. Hidden in their perfect shadows, drawing your eyes, one man's initials mark you.

Ayah, silhouetted, dabs sugar water on your hands and tells you not to scratch.

Mama reads out loud, voice quavering. She reads the stories she used to tell you at bedtime: Sita following Rama into the jungle, Sita keeping patient house for Rama and his brother. Sita obeying, Sita turning aside arguments with a gentle smile, Sita's staunch loyalty.

Ayah sighs. "Never underestimate those virtues in a marriage," she murmurs. You wonder, too late to ask, how she knows.

3. Exile

Rama was the eldest of his brothers; but one of his father's junior wives, wanting her son to be king, prevailed upon her husband to exile Rama for fourteen years.

Ever obedient to all his parents, Rama left. His brother Lakshman would not part from him, so they and Sita lived together in the jungle. The princes learned to be hunters, the princess to keep a house.

§

You join your prince in California, land of pink-skinned people and red-skinned trees and green card applications, to live in a golden house in the hills; burned yellow stucco, bamboo floors, golden tones in Persian rugs and Ravi Varma prints. It even smells lemon-gold; citrus fresheners are plugged into electrical outlets in every room.

The front windows look onto a spill of iceplant, unnaturally green. To the back grow colors of tarnish—rust and verdigris clawed with old-silver branches, sage soft and white as oxidized lead. Swimming pools sprouting, copper sulphate blue. You polish every figurine and oil lamp before they turn into the hillside.

When Mama phones, you describe the house. “What about Ram, *beti*?” she asks.

The bedsheets are creamy, soft as rich soil, but your first night under them was painful. Worse, it was awkward; Ram too anxious to laugh at the absurdity of it, trying too hard for you to relax, gone when you woke. He’s been working late, most nights, too tired when he gets home to do more than cuddle. You say, “He has a lot to catch up on.”

You don’t say that you’ve mostly been relieved.

“It takes time,” Mama says, “and work. Love is the result of a successful marriage, not the cause.”

§

Carven rosewood is scattered through the house, the images familiar, beloved, absent only in the kitchen of flat glass and steel. You dust battles out of myth, running pink microfiber over maces, demon tusks, four-armed gods. Like the maids do at home.

You pull out your old Ramayana comics, the ones with pages falling out. Ram finds one on the bedside table. “I used to love those when I was a kid,” he says.

“They’re not bad for adults either,” you tell him.

“They made me think I’d turn blue someday.” He picks one up, traces a line with one fingertip; his smile is half embarrassed, half wistful.

§

Ram warns you of a party next weekend. “Just another type of work,” he says. “Schmoozing. Ranjan’s always are. I’m sorry we won’t get the evening together.”

You start to smile at the prospect; you’ve hardly talked to anyone except for Americans so incomprehensible you’re amazed both of your languages are called English. But there are lines between his eyebrows. You finish the smile, say, “You’ll have to make it up to me.” The worry lines ease.

You practice walking in heels till you’re confident that you won’t stumble or put a heel through chiffon. They’re for the beaded blue sari with the strappy blouse, and the long earrings heavy with sapphires, the ones that make you look like Aishwarya. You hope.

You dream of heels sinking into damp soil. When you try to pull free, the tarnished ground shakes under you. You're not sure, later, if you dreamed the quake.

§

You can't help tensing up in the car, though Ram knows what he's doing. They drive on the wrong side of the road. It would be easier if you were in the back seat, with a driver up front. But normal people don't employ chauffeurs here.

And only fobs call them drivers.

At the party you smile through the laughter at "Ram and Sita," take the violently pink cocktail someone hands you. You're fairly sure that refusing to drink is fobbish, too. You sip. It even tastes pink.

The rest of the party is a happy blur. You're never more than slightly tipsy—you know better—but that little bit helps. And it's a respite from being a jungle housewife. You have *missed* getting to know people. You have missed having a chance to sparkle.

Ram gets quieter, seems more tired, as you become central. You want to tuck him into bed; but at least you're taking some of the burden off him.

But he is frowning all the more on the way home, and his lips are one thin line. Eventually he says, "Was there a single man there you didn't flirt with? Oh right, there was. Me."

§

You make naan *bhaaji* and pistachio *mitthai* as Mama and the cook taught you, sending smells of cardamom and cumin and chili through the house. The calming fresh-earth smells of home, your spell to repair whatever went wrong. But by the time he gets back the naan is leathery, the *bhaaji* needs reheating, and the pale-citrus scent has taken back over. He doesn't complain; he doesn't say anything at all.

You bite your tongue, tell yourself that Sita in the stories wouldn't snap at a silent husband. And you did misjudge the timing; overcompensated for the help you're used to at home.

Except that this *is* home.

§

You catch him before he leaves for work. He is heavy-eyed, the frown etched deep into his forehead. He reaches out a hand. "Sita…"

Arms crossed, you say, "What did you mean, flirting?"

His hand drops. He turns away. "You'd like a definition? Try the dictionary."

The door snicks shut behind him before you can respond, and you find yourself shaking in fury. Sita might not have lost her temper in the stories—but in the stories Rama never *sulked.* You want to knock the ground out from under his smug feet, shake his perfect façade of a house loose. You want him running home to the mess you're feeling —

And with a rumble too huge to hear, the world drops away.

He bursts into the kitchen just minutes after the shaking stops, eyes wide and tie as crooked as his paintings. He says, "I came as—we were right at the epicenter." He hugs you tight. "That was a big one. You must have been so scared."

You are one huge pounding heartbeat, but you're not the least bit scared.

§

You dream of kneeling in yellow dust, citrus-scented, trying to coax a banana plant to grow. Next to you, Lakshman builds a sandcastle. It slides into an undifferentiated hill each time his hands move away.

A paintbrush lies between you, caked with paint; the tip is a single, unbending clump the color of dried blood.

§

He turns up the next day; in the waking world he has a round baby face and an incongruous mustache. You offer him *bhel*, coffee, sweets.

"So gracious a hostess," he says, "but I need a nap. I'll settle in my normal room, *acha?* You won't even know I'm here." He runs a hand through his curly hair and sighs. "Gods know Ram won't."

You smile politely, wishing you could unhear that.

He grimaces. "Shit. Blame it on the jet lag, okay?"

At dinner he tells Ram, "I missed you."

Ram laughs. "Of course you did. You're surely not here to get away from anyone."

Expression fades out of Lakshman's face. He stares at the potato on his fork while he mushes it against the plate. "I wasn't *just*—ah, forget it."

Ram's smile does not show teeth. "And yet. She's our mother now."

Lakshman mutters, "*Our* mother wasn't a—"

"Don't," says Ram.

§

Lakshman's up early the next day. He's not a quiet riser. You stumble out of rice-paddy dreams into the hall as Ram says, "Where are you

going?"

"Coming in with you," says Lakshman.

Ram laughs. "As if I'm going to bore you off," he says. "Sleep in. Have fun."

"I am here," Lakshman says, "to help." There's a note in his voice that strangles yours.

"And you're helping by being here."

You find Lakshman, later, slumped in front of a Hindi film. His eyes are slitted, one hand holding his face up. Thinking he's asleep, you back out.

You're pulling the door shut when he says, "Good thing we're both decorative, isn't it."

§

You replace all the room fresheners with sandalwood scented ones. You arrange huge red roses in a new vase and hope Ram will bring you their replacements.

§

"So why not dance professionally?" Lakshman asks over dinner. His eyes start on you, but he's looking at Ram by the time he stops speaking.

In that moment you hate him. Because he's poking at this, because Ram hasn't, because the sweets he brought are covered in silver foil and smell of home. Because Ram is home early today. You focus on tearing your paratha into bits. "It hasn't come up," you manage.

"You know what they're like," Ram says. "No respect for their own traditions, let alone ours. They'd think she was just an entertainer. They wouldn't get it."

Lakshman snorts. "In San Jose?" he says. "You wouldn't see three white faces in the audience."

"There's plenty of them," Ram says, "who look pretty much like us."

You say, "I'd rather not go on a stage, anyway." You wonder if that's true. Your paratha is a shredded mess. "But I might teach, sometime."

"Not that you'd have to," says Ram.

You nod, get up to get everyone's lassi.

Lakshman comes with you to take a glass. His hands are unexpectedly soft, and far too close. Lips brushing your ear, mustache hairs bristly against your skin, he murmurs, "Never going to happen."

You bite your tongue, give Ram his glass with the best smile you

can manage. A dozen stories remind you that Sita thought of Lakshman—always, properly—as a brother.

You suggest to Ram that night that Lakshman may be happier helping at the restaurant. He sighs. “Nobody’s happy working in a restaurant,” he says. “But Lakshman would cut his hand off for me—and laugh, and insist he was tired of that hand anyway.”

You dream of serving golden mud on supple banana leaves, their green too bright for California, the dirt too dead for the jungle.

§

You wake to Asha Bhosle remixes on full volume, bass rattling walls, shivering the air, humming in your chest. You’d yell at Lakshman—but he’s not in the living room, so you dance instead, your own improvised semiclassical through the jungle in your mind; you end on your toes, arms thrown out, breathless, laughing.

“It’s a damn crime,” Lakshman says from the doorway, “to keep you locked away here.”

Ram brings you orchids, orange-gold, elegant, bare of leaves. “I’m glad he’s here,” he says. “I’ll have time—soon, surely—but till then, I’m so glad you’re not lonely.”

4. Capture

Sita saw a deer one day, a glimpse of brushed gold that bounded into bushes and jungle vines and vanished in their shadows. Normally Sita cared little for pretty possessions; duty ornamented her more truly than any bangle or earring. But she wanted that deer and could not stop wanting.

The deer ran from Rama without panic or hesitation, and he realized it was an unnatural creature. So he shot it.

The deer screamed out in Rama’s voice.

Lakshman was supposed to take care of Sita, but when they heard that scream, he drew a protective circle around her and ran out into the forest.

§

Remixes wake you again; an invitation. You hesitate on the threshold. Lakshman looks at you out of the corner of his eye, grins, and starts singing along with Asha in a squeaky voice. You join in on the male part, voice wobbling with laughter. When he attempts to dance as the girl, you lose the tune entirely.

Halfway through the second song, Lakshman has to lean against

the wall to catch his breath. You keep dancing, feet lighter than they've been in months.

You spin, and catch the hopeless wish in his eyes.

§

You can draw a circle of space around yourself, keep Lakshman out of it, but not without him noticing.

"Just tell me what I did," he says.

You can't answer.

He looks away, mutters, "Or is it what Ram doesn't do?"

That note again; jealousy. Did you encourage him? Did you want to?

In the old tales, this could never happen; in a film, it would be the scene before he died, and grief would bring you and Ram together.

If this were a film, you'd have just killed him. You reach out for the wall, needing strength, insight, a different tale. Needing.

The ground below you grumbles. Just a little shake; a reminder.

Lakshman looks around, disconcerted. You pull yourself straight. "Your elder brother," you say, "works gruelling hours so we don't have to. It's time you gave him a chance."

You're not sure it's Lakshman you are telling.

§

"Come on, no, let me take over," he says to Ram. "Just for a couple of days. You haven't even had a honeymoon."

Ram says, "You don't know what you're asking."

"And that's the problem. Look, what can I really screw up in two days?"

"I *would* like to see Napa," you say dutifully.

Ram looks from Lakshman to you, then back again. He rubs the bridge of his nose. "Okay, come in with me for now," he says. "but promise you'll tell me if it's too much, *acha*?"

Alone, you fill the vase with sunflowers and dance to them.

§

"He's *managing*," Ram says.

You've heard some variant of this every few hours all weekend. Ram checks his phone constantly, and he's called home "just in case" at least six times. You're pretty sure he won't notice a redwood till the photographs are printed. You say, "Maybe because Lakshman likes people."

Ram frowns, bewildered. "I like people fine," he says. "Just not

when they're being asses."

§

Lakshman's grin and gestures are huge when he tells Ram how the weekend went. Ram's frown just grows. "I'm glad it wasn't horrendous," he says. "You never know with Saturdays."

Lakshman laughs.

Later, he asks you how the weekend was; you tell him it was nice. His grin falls abruptly away. "No fibs," he says.

You aren't about to tell him you dreamed of dancing around redwoods with Ram—a Ram with hair long enough to curl, with a quick grin, with no worry between his brows. The silence drags out.

Lakshman says, "This is…you're not…" He grabs at his hair. "Look. It's your life, but he's my brother. If you don't tell him, or do something, I will."

You visit a therapist in a glass hospital drenched in soothing music and diffuse light. She smiles kindly, and she enunciates without talking down to you; you would like to like her. But what can you say to her, this golden stranger? Truth would betray every vow you've made; besides, her concern is a role. How do Americans manage it? You leave her bewildered and don't go again. Nor do you tell Ram.

You make sure to smile brightly around Lakshman, to laugh at everything, but his face grows longer and more drawn, and when he's home Ram's worry lines deepen. You tell Lakshman it's all sorted out now.

He says, "You think I can't see what it is?"

Two days later he tells Ram he's going back to Mumbai. The brothers, both full of silences, look more alike than you have seen them outside dreams.

The night Lakshman leaves you find a small vial, stripped of labels, on your bedside table.

5. Ravana

While both the men were gone, ten-headed Ravana came to the cottage disguised as a wise man; and Sita, compelled by the laws of hospitality, left her circle to care for the guest. The moment her foot touched ground outside Lakshman's white line, Ravana snatched her up and carried her away to his palace.

§

The perfect wife would flush these down the toilet. Or better, tell her husband everything.

You drop the vial into the drawer. Under it is a sheaf of papers covered in tiny print. Warnings, overdose, side effects. In red pen across this, Lakshman has written BE CAREFUL.

You shove that into the drawer too, resolving to tell Ram, to work out what to do together. Hoping you won't have to admit everything.

You'd left him nursing a drink in the living room, wondering why his brother left; you fetch a glass of water and ask if he's coming to bed. He says, "Later."

You go back to bed. The pills are white, engraved with Xs. You step out of the circle.

§

You dream of floating, weightless, and wake with cheeks strange from smiling. Your neck's not stiff. You wiggle your head back and forth, alive after all.

Later you dance, and you dance, and you dance.

The single pills stop working far too soon. You can't focus. You can't sit down for long. In your dreams you're falling, always falling, never touching earth. You want to scream at Ram. Some nights later, unable to sleep, you take a second pill and fall back, smiling again.

Light behind your eyes becomes a plane of perfect triangles, white, black, white, black, and the most beautiful golden deer you've ever seen steps out from geometry, from stories, looking straight at you with one hoof raised. You call for Ram. The deer startles, bounds away over triangle grass and triangle bushes, a green too sharp to grow: traffic lights, cellophane, glass.

You're not asking him to chase it. You know this tale too well, and its green is from too far a land. But Ram doesn't wait to hear you; he just says "Later," and runs after the deer as though it was Lakshman, and maybe it is. Lakshman is gone, after all.

Ram is beautiful as the deer, *kurta* glowing white against that cutting green. And though you know he's gone and you'll soon hear his scream, you cannot stop smiling.

§

"I thought we'd see a dance show for your birthday," says Ram one day. "But I'll have to work late. Maybe next weekend?"

You beam at him. Five pills last night; resentment lives outside your glass-lined cage.

"—Are you all right?" The frown on his face makes you giggle, then sneeze. The house is full of sharp-edged dust these days. "Of

course I'm all right," you say, but someone's voice is screaming those words and someone's tears blur the sight of someone's fists pounding, pounding against Ram's white kurta as he holds you.

§

Faces glare through the lattice. Tens, hundreds of faces, all the same, ten heads on one man leering at you, reaching for you through fragile interwoven triangles. "Rama will come for me," you tell the faces.

They laugh.

And you knew all along that Ravana was waiting, that you courted him. Only triangles keep him away, now; white pills and knife-edges and the hope of Ram.

Who wears Lakshman's face, sometimes.

You scream curses. Someone shakes you, holds you. Smudge-eyed, frightened, as he never is in tales. With triangles in his hair and dirt-green walls behind him, and that dead antiseptic smell underneath. For an instant he is blue. You snicker.

"Sita," he says in a tenth of his voice, "where have you gone?"

6. Rescue

The monkey people had engineers who could build a bridge to Lanka. To win their aid, Rama helped their king's brother kill him and usurp his throne. We're told this was honorable, but maybe he just did anything he had to. He needed Sita back. Then.

§

You wake in a room not your own, dressed in clinical widow's white. The bed, blanket, IV drip are sharp-edged with green, and the many-headed demon comes back in every counselor who talks you down—to four pills, three, two.

You taste his copper sweat in the air. You hear him speak from five mouths at once. He's hurting you. You dream of him, reaching for you while you stand at the edge of his tower. You think of stepping off that edge, and hear yourself crying for Mama.

You fall into yourself instead.

The tower is gone. The rehab people are just people now; people who help you build a bridge that Ram can cross.

And he comes, scared, stubborn, too tired for heroism, cutting through every face the demon wears. You walk through fire to stand with him again.

Lakshman, he says later, told him about the pills. The anger in his voice is a thin skin over hurt. “What did I do wrong,” he says, “that stopped you talking to me?”

You say, “When were you there to talk to?”

He loses a breath, crumples, like you punched him in the stomach. You start to stammer an apology. He reaches out to cup your cheek. “No,” he murmurs, pain shimmering in his eyes, “Please don’t say sorry. Not for being right.”

He stays till they chase him out, and he comes back and back again. He sneaks Hindi films in on his laptop; and when you dance along, sitting up in bed, he dances with you.

7. Sanctuary

The story ends here, sometimes; the demon vanquished, Ram triumphant, reunited with his perfect wife and returned from exile to reign in peace.

And sometimes it goes on: Lord Rama’s people start whispering that Sita has been tainted; it is shameful to keep a wife who’d been under another man’s roof. Rama listens to his people.

And exiles her again.

§

The doctors say a lot of long words that mean the drug hit you unusually. Their lips thin when you explain this to Ram, and they add that you never should have been medicated in the first place. They suggest a change of location to help you recover.

“To lower my chances of relapse, they mean,” you say. Their lips thin again.

Ram ignores them. “I’ve been wondering,” he says, “if you might heal better back home. With your parents. Or in an ashram, maybe? With simple food and clean air and peace.”

His wistful tone speaks of jasmine, of rain on fresh banana leaves, but the words stop your breath. You know this version of the story. Once Sita goes to the ashram, Rama will never take her back. He’ll take the twins she bears, but he’ll hesitate over her—and she will give up. She’ll call on the Earth her mother one last time; the earth will open under her feet, proving finally that she is pure.

You think of falling into safe earth, of cool dark-smelling damp.

You think of what you’d lose.

You call Mama, tell her. Everything. You talk and cry and talk into the phone, and she is silent for so long you think the call has dropped. “Mama?”

"I'm here," she says.

"What should I do?"

"You should come home, *beti,*" Mama says. Her voice is old and thin. And calm. "But tell me one thing first. Where is home?"

§

Even the old tales end two ways. Why not a third?

"I'm not leaving," you tell Ram that night, "unless you come too." Your finger is on his lips before he can protest. "Call Lakshman back," you say. "You know he'll take over here if you ask. What you maybe don't know is that he *wants* to. Let him help us, love."

He looks at you, hopeful, uncertain; no more perfect than you are. Blood pounds in your ears. "Come home with me," you say. "Home where I can dance. We'll start a different story."

His lips find yours, and you say no more.

Free Bird

Caren Gussoff

Mamo had strong ideas about *baXt*, luck.

Finding a coin minted in one of our birth years was lucky. Picking up a rock with a hole in it was lucky. Seeing a butterfly was lucky. Carrying a packet of salt in your purse was lucky. Catching a falling leaf was lucky. Listing lucky things was lucky.

Feeling lucky was lucky.

And, as my mother would sit and watch natural disaster unfold on the television—footage of the hills outside Austin on fire, earthquakes cracking the Washington monument, major river floods in the Upper Midwest, and hurricanes pounding the Gulf—she would reiterate how I, her foundling daughter, was the luckiest of all.

"We could be any of those places," she'd say. "But we aren't." She'd reach out to touch me or stroke my hair, and if she couldn't reach me, just hold her palm in my direction. "Our road luck finds us here."

Meaning that instead of chasing *baXt po drom*, luck on the road, like the rest of the Gypsies, Mamo and Tate and Roxy and also, by choice, Mamo's brother Marko, his wife Gracie, and our grandma Olive Dei—were tied here. In one place. To the trailers rusting a ring into the ground behind the façade propped against the converted mother-in-law house that Mamo and Aunt Gracie split right down the middle. They used it as an *ofisa*—one half for Mamo's life-coaching business and one half for Gracie's fortune-telling parlor.

My family didn't want to take the chance that if my people came looking for me they wouldn't be able to find me on the road like *Rrom* find each other.

"If you'd been *gadjo*," Dei told me, "we wouldn't care. They throw away everything. But your people saw how we are for our children, and that's why they trust us with something so precious and beautiful."

I was also a complicated victory for Mamo. She wanted her children to have an education, stability, choices—easier with a permanent address. That meant less travelling, no matter how you did the math.

And I was a perfect excuse, a reasonable explanation, a watertight alibi to put down roots that made her look good. She wanted her daughters to straddle worlds, between *Rrom* and *gadjo*. And if luck would have that one of her daughters was between two worlds, this —and literally—another, that was how it should be.

Ω

Roxy drove into the deep orange sun like she could outrun twilight. I crossed my arms and stared meaningfully at the speedometer like the dutiful big sister. Roxy ignored my staring like the naughty little sister. She was enjoying our once-in-a-lifetime sisters' road trip too much.

"I've got music," Roxy said, as if that was what we'd been talking about, and reached behind the seat where she'd stashed her tote bag. She held onto the wheel with one hand, bouncing the truck like a boat close to shipwreck. I grabbed the wheel as Roxy pulled out a CD and shoved it into the stereo. "A friend made me this."

I began cursing out my sister and her driving, but "Free Bird" started and she turned up the volume to drown me out. "I love this song," she shouted and sang along loudly: "When I cleave your face tomorrow, will you dismember me?"

I stopped staring at the speed and laughed at my sister. To reciprocate, she slowed down the truck a bit. "And Candace Bergen cannot cha-a-a-ange." Roxy slapped the steering wheel as she sang.

But we grew silent when the song slid into its five-minute outro, and then into a love song I didn't recognize. I glanced at my sister and scratched my little finger. "A friend made this for you?"

Roxy didn't answer, but she clicked the volume down a few bars, just low enough to talk. "So," she said. "What do you know about the *chav* from Barstow who Tate's importing to sniff at us when we get back home?"

I couldn't tell if I had made my finger itch by scratching it, or if I had just noticed that it was itching. I licked my finger and wiped it on my pants. "I don't know much. A real *Rrom baro* California family."

"Tate will have one of us married off yet." She glanced at me, as if there was a question which one of us it would be. "I don't want—" Then she glanced at me again. "Are you scratching?"

"No," I said. "Maybe. No. Definitely not." I was. "Do you have any lotion on you?"

"In my bag," Roxy answered, and started to turn around to reach behind her seat again.

I grabbed her arm. "I'll get it." I pulled the bag onto my knees. Inside was a tumble of papers and a scarf that let out puffs of

perfume when I moved it. Towards the bottom was a tube of cocoa butter. I rubbed some onto my hands. It stung.

It was starting. I wanted to scream.

The next exit had a truck stop and diner at the bottom of the off ramp. We pulled to the pumps and in the fluorescent light my hand looked as pink as the ham we'd had for dinner.

"Fuck," Roxy said. She looked at me briefly, concerned for my feelings, and then said it again.

"I can probably make it," I said.

"Fuck." Roxy sighed a few times. "No. You'd be miserable and I'd be miserable that you were miserable." She leaned down to her bag, gathered at my feet. "This road trip is off. You want to call Mamo, or should I?"

I looked at my hands. "I can take a bus home."

"Don't be stupid, *Rovli*." Roxy sighed again, then put on a brave face. "Go get ice. I'll call Mamo." She reached for me, but I had the door open, feet on the ground. "It's OK, Kiz. It really is."

It wasn't. "No," I said. "It isn't."

Roxy pulled her phone from the depths of her bag. "It will be."

Ω

Some stories aren't meant to be told. The more they get told, the more they change from what they once were, worn down and smooth like pieces of sea glass too beautiful to have ever been broken bottles. In the telling, mundane stories become colorful, colorful becomes fantastic, fantastic becomes legend, and legend becomes myth. Some stories aren't meant to be beautiful or mythic, they are meant to be true—*chachi paramicha*—and so those are better not told.

Mamo can tell me every detail up to and after finding me. It was too humid for Seattle and the rains wouldn't come. Lake Union smelled like swamp gas instead of salt and fish. She was seven months pregnant with Roxy, who had settled right on her bladder. She and Tate hadn't made it out of the trailer and into the truck when she had to go to the bathroom. She wouldn't make it back to the *trela*, and Gracie had a client in the office. So Mamo waddled next door to the empty lot to squat. The lot had been empty for years, iced with green moss, plenty of private areas to let loose behind the support beams that held up the Interstate.

Mamo ran towards a beam, but then she saw me and called for Tate. After that, she said, her memories were fuzzy, like she was very drunk or dreaming. I was lying on a rock under a tree, she said, sleeping soundly, and shimmering as if I were wet. My legs were too long, stiff and loose like bell clappers when she picked me up. But I opened my eyes and wrapped my arms around her like I was much

older than the three months I seemed to be, and from that moment, she says, I was theirs.

I peeled for the first time when I was five. It started on my hands and feet. Mamo immediately ruled out a burn or chicken pox; she knew those well. She hit the internet for articles about allergies, rashes, and eczema, as long scales of silvery skin peeled away from me in sheets to reveal shiny pink beneath. My mother soaked me in oatmeal baths, rubbed olive oil into my skin, put me in the sun, protected me from the sun, and decided, after looking long and hard at hundreds of photos of skin diseases, that I had plaque psoriasis.

Tate watched me rub my back against the garden wall like a molting snake and said, "She doesn't have soreitis, Mala. She's—" He didn't finish his sentence because he caught me looking at him, stopped cold in the middle of a scratch.

He'd say this same thing many times throughout my life: "She's…." He'd usually end by saying "…my girl," and hug me in his hairy arms. That moment he said, "She's fine," and went over and picked me up, flipped me onto my tummy and rubbed at my itchy skin with his beard until I laughed with relief.

Later, I knew what he had been going to say each time. *Alien. She's an alien, Mala, doing whatever aliens do*. But he never said it. Not once when I could hear, and probably not ever.

My psoriasis, whether or not it was psoriasis, was one of my more convincingly human quirks. It was if I'd been built by someone who'd read about humans, but never actually seen one. My growth spurts left me nearly seven feet tall. I had pores but never a blemish or a pimple. My hair was naturally shiny but all one flat color, like a cheap dye job. My toes and fingers were all the same length. And I had no lines across my palms.

This disturbed my Aunt Gracie the most. Mamo respected Aunt Gracie's profession above and beyond the cultural tradition of it, the encyclopedic knowledge of human nature one had to have to be successful, and the long gold earrings Gracie wore, and the thousands of scarves she draped and tied all over her half of the ofisa. But, Mamo said, her *phen* had started to believe her own shit.

Grandma Dei tried to put the whole issue of my palms to bed one family dinner, looking up suddenly after one bite of her meatloaf and announcing that my palms were blank canvases upon which only I would carve the story of my life. "And we should all respect that," she finished, looking at Gracie.

Ω

A bag of ice was two dollars. I could lay my hand in it, then my arm, then my other hand and arm, and spare Roxy my fidgeting and

moaning during the trip back to Seattle. I also bought Roxy two extra-big packs of peanut butter cups and a liter of iced tea, partly as apology and partly to keep her awake enough to drive.

By the pumps, Roxy was talking quietly into her phone, and something about the way she slid her foot back and forth over a loose rock and shielded her face told me she wasn't speaking to our parents. Her short hair stood up in electrified spikes that made her look extra pretty and a little sad.

I slid into the passenger seat and arranged the candy and tea on her side, each one at a right angle to the other. I waited for her to be done.

When she opened the door, she glanced at the seat and smiled. "Thank you," she said, then placed my gifts between our seats. She passed me the phone as she climbed in. "Call Mamo. I haven't yet."

I waited until we'd merged going north and dialed home. Mamo answered, the television blaring as it did every evening until Dei fell asleep, and she knew immediately as soon as I said hello.

"None of us will go," she said. "We will stay here. It's a bad omen anyway."

"Ma," I said, "I'll be fine. You all should go. And take Roxy down too. I'm fine; it's nothing different." And I was fine, and it wasn't any different. I'd itch and peel and then it would be over. My skin would be sensitive to lotion or perfume, and then it'd be another day. I didn't need or care for an audience, and in fact would hide in my part of the trailer beneath a soft fleece blanket until it was done. Then I'd shake out the sheets and the blankets and it'd be over. Until it happened again.

"We'll discuss it when you get home," she said, and after a bunch of kisses from her to Roxy, and back and forth with everyone else at home, I hung up and opened the sack of ice at my feet. The cold felt great. I watched the headlights of the cars heading south.

I would have fallen asleep but Roxy started singing again. "I've got to be travelling on now…." She turned to me, as if waiting for me to join in again, but when I didn't, she tapped her ear as if it were clogged. "Crap," she said. "That song. It gets in there, yeah?"

"It's called an ear worm." I leaned over and turned up the stereo, then pushed the back button until I heard the opening notes. "The only cure," I explained, and we sang and drove into the night.

Ω

Not too long after the first time I peeled, Mamo started telling Roxy and I the story of Lallah Pombo. She never told it the same way twice, yet it was always the same.

"There was and was not," she'd say, "in the long ago days, a gypsy

family who found a young girl. They called her Lallah Pombo and took her back to their caravan, which never travelled. They raised Lallah and loved Lallah and Lallah was their very own. They all lived in peace and abundance and sang and danced to the sun and the moon and the rain, who together had raised them and loved them and made them their own.

"One day, the rain didn't come, even though the sun and the moon did. This happened for a long time. They sang for the rain, and they noticed Lallah couldn't sing on key. They danced for the rain, and they saw that Lallah couldn't keep a beat. They berated her and called her useless, but the only rain they saw came from Lallah's eyes."

Always, around this point in the story, Roxy knew nothing in it was going to be about her, so she stopped listening and fell asleep.

Mamo would continue: "So, Lallah ran away to find the rain. She wandered to the city and she sat among scholars and merchants and laborers and adventurers, but no one knew where the rain lived. She wandered from village to village to city to city, and the only rain came from her eyes.

"One day, she reached the end of the world, the shore of a great sea. The sun and the moon both shone down, and she knew she had found the rain. The rain appeared to her, and asked why the gypsies had sent her.

"'I am useless, she answered. I cannot sing and I cannot dance and have nothing else to give my people.'

"The rain patted her shoulders and soaked her hair and spread across the lands. But first he told her, 'You have found me, and are not useless. You will go home and you will tell the stories of what you have seen. Then your people will travel, and sing and dance the stories for everyone all over the world. And wherever you go, I will follow, and the land will give you all that you need.'"

One night, Mamo tucked us in and told us the story. Roxy was asleep by the middle, as she always was, but when Mamo was finished, she tucked a stuffed elephant under Roxy's heavy arm, and a stuffed unicorn toy under mine.

Roxy rolled onto her new elephant and snored quietly. Mamo watched as I turned the unicorn around and around in my hands. "Do you know what it is?" she asked. "It's a magical animal. A unicorn. Very special. Just like you." She flicked off the lamp, kissed me, then Roxy, and left our trailer.

I lay in the dark, that night, for a long time. Then I pulled out a flashlight and my sewing box. I ripped the unicorn's horn off and carefully pinned the wound closed with tiny safety pins from a sewing kit.

Mamo never commented when she saw me lugging it around the

next day, her Lallah Pombo and a plain old stuffed horse.

She never stopped telling the story.

Ω

The truck came to a stop and then shut off, and I woke, arms to the elbows in the bag of melting ice.

"We're here, Kiz," Roxy said. "Wake up."

Either Aunt Gracie and Uncle Marko had been fighting, or Marko had been drinking hard liquor, because she emerged from the ofisa to greet us, alone. She hugged Roxy tight against her kimono, and then hugged me equally hard, as if she hadn't seen me all summer.

"Were you trying to call again?" Gracie asked us. "The phone kept ringing and no one was there."

We shook our heads.

"Well, then, go on inside," she said. "Mala won't sleep until she sees you." She pulled a cigarette from inside a voluminous sleeve. "I'm not sleeping either, but that's because your *Káko* wants to kill me with his snoring." She lit the cigarette, then shooed us. "Go on."

Roxy went first, through the red door and over to our parents' trailer. I went straight to the trailer she and I shared, kicked off my shoes, and wrapped myself in my fleece blanket.

Roxy came in and dumped her bag across her half of the back room. I pretended to be asleep. She tiptoed out, but through the open window I could hear her on her phone.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "I'm sure. I just want to make—" Silence. Then "My sister will be here." Quiet. "I want to tell Kizzy. She's the only one—" Hush. "The train is lovely." A pause. "Phone me with your info. Of course I'll pick you up." Footsteps.

"Kizzy? I know you're awake."

I answered her with a noise like "Ungh."

She waited, as if I would say more. I heard her plug in something, then rub her wet head with the towel. She slipped into her bed. "I love you, *Rovli,"* she said, then music filled her earphones. I lay awake through two complete repeats of the CD, "Free Bird" to "Free Bird," before I fell asleep.

Ω

I'd always hoped the peeling would reveal itself to be cyclical somehow, predictable like menstruation, or have triggers I could avoid, like hot foods or gluten. Instead it seemed to come and go as it pleased, lasting two, three days, leaving me clean and raw.

Mamo gently squeezed my shoulder until I awoke. "How is it?"

"*Na dara*, Ma. I'm fine."

“I should be staying with you, not going all the way to Florida,” she said, and I realized she was already in her travelling clothes, scarf holding back her long hair.

The past two days had been a fever dream of itch and fatigue. “I’ve peeled. It’s done,” I said. “Besides, Fatlip is your brother. You have to go to his wedding.”

“We could have girls’ time. The three of us,” she began, then sighed, resigned.

“Roxy’s staying?”

“Roxy’s staying.” Mamo laid a stack of cash on my side table. “This should be plenty. Use some to get her a birthday cake? And a bottle of wine?”

“I will.”

“And something nice?”

I nodded.

“And if it gets worse, you’ll call Levowitz?”

“I promise.”

As Mamo hugged me, the phone rang. She answered our extension, then just held the phone to her ear without saying anything.

“What—” But she shushed me with a finger. After a few seconds, she simply hung up.

“Someone,” she said, “just keeps calling. They don’t say anything, but I can hear them. Do you think it’s something bad? A creeper? Should we stay?”

Then Tate came in. “It’s a wrong number, I tell you,” he said. “Or a bill collector.” He smiled at that, but Mamo did not.

Tate came over and ruffled my hair. “We should head out, Mala.”

“All right,” Mamo said. “But you girls keep the doors locked. Just in case.”

Then Tate kissed me and Mamo kissed me, and I waddled stiffly out of bed to wave to Dei, Gracie, and *Káko* Marko. Roxy and I stood side by side as they drove away.

Ω

The hot tub was a gift from Uncle Marko. *Káko* was a trader by occupation. By passion. He was continually up-swapping something for something else: car parts for a flat of soymilk, a flat of soymilk for a collection of old Playboys, a Playboy collection for a pinball machine. Occasionally, when he up-traded to something valuable enough, he would sell it.

Káko kept a photo of a Canadian *gadjo* in his wallet. He’d pull it out as motivation. The kid had traded a single paperclip for a house in Saskatchewan. *One red paperclip*, he’d say, with great reverence.

Marko might have been able to trade that hot tub up for

something, or even sell it. But instead, he traded again, for a couple of hours from a pair of sad-faced apprentice plumbers to install the tub in the center of the garden. He said it was for everyone, but looked at me when he demonstrated how it worked. Trailer showers gave me cramps from stooping.

I uncovered the tub and slipped in. Even over the hum of the jets, I could hear music from our trailer. “Roxy, not that CD again,” I said towards the glow of her laptop.

“I love this CD,” she called back.

I let the warm water clear off the last of the loose skin, sticky and fine as cobwebs. I had finished peeling, and I thought about calling in to pick up a morning shift at work, then getting Roxy a cake and bringing home Chinese. Then Roxy turned down the music.

I heard her say, “Hello,” then, “No, this is her sister,” and then, again, “Hello?” A moment later, she came out of the trailer. “Someone just called and asked for you,” she said. “Then they hung up.”

“Who was it?”

“No idea. It was male, though,” she said, and waggled her eyebrows.

“Har,” I answered. It must have been the silent caller again, and Roxy thought she was being funny.

She sat up on the side of the tub to talk to me.

“I was reading up on ear worms,” she said, letting her bare feet dangle in the water. “Scientists don’t know what causes them.”

“I’m pretty sure repetition has something to do with it,” I answered.

She splashed me in response. “A friend made me that CD.”

“So you said.” I looked at my beautiful sister in the darkness, the shape of her nose, her thin, muscled arms, the curve of her breasts, and I drew up my knees, light green in the trailer light reflecting off the water, and large as cabbages.

I straightened my legs and watched the sky. My sister kicked her feet gently in the tub.

“Ever wish Mamo and Tate would let us date who we want?” Roxy asked quietly.

“I never thought about it.”

“Really?” Roxy asked. “I think about it a lot.” Her feet bobbed around like elegant fish. “About picking your own—” She paused, searching for the word. “—mate.” She leaned down, as if to brush something from her calf, then continued. “Like, what if I brought home someone white? Or Chinese? Or Jewish?”

“Is your CD-making friend white, Chinese, or Jewish?”

Roxy ignored that. “I mean, how hard would they freak out? How

much would they hate me?" she asked. Her tone suggested she already knew the answer.

It was a new moon, and the sky was dark. If I squinted, I could ignore the smoky haze of headlights on the freeway.

"There's something I want to tell you," Roxy said.

But then, a flash, a blaze across the sky. "A shooting star," I said, and Roxy craned her neck. We watched the bright pink ionization trail until it disappeared behind the southbound lanes.

"That's lucky," she said.

"Make a wish," I told her.

Ω

Roxy poked me awake. I opened my eyes, and she was leaning over my bed in our trailer.

"Kizzy," she said. "I have to talk to you." She sat down on the floor next to my bed, cross-legged, and balanced her phone in one hand. She encouraged me to sit up in a hurry by staring.

"Is everything OK?" I asked. I couldn't remember the last time Roxy voluntarily woke up before I did; then again, she'd just spent a summer working crazy, long shifts, watching for fires in the deep forests of Oregon.

"*Na dara*," she said. "I just have to tell you."

"OK."

Roxy opened and closed her mouth, thinking, like she did sometimes when she had to use only English or only Romany, and had to plan her words carefully. Then she said it. "I'm a lesbian."

The words hung like dust in the air. She expected a reaction. The only one I could give her was, "So?"

She sat up on the bed, then leaned into me, wrapped her arms around me. She sobbed in my shoulder, partly happy, partly miserable.

"So?" I repeated.

She didn't answer, just lay on my nightshirt, wet with tears and snot. She calmed down, then sat back and looked at me.

"Did you wonder why we drove straight south from the fire station?"

"Not really."

"I was going to tell you on the road. I didn't want to go to Uncle's wedding in Florida. I wanted to go to Oakland."

"California?"

"Yeah," she said.

"To see your friend. The one that made you the CD. The white, Chinese, Jewish one."

"Yeah." Roxy sniffed. "I don't think she is Chinese or Jewish,

though."

"And I messed up the plans."

"It's OK, *Rovli*. You didn't mess up anything. She's coming here instead. Her train gets in soon." Roxy looked at her phone. "An hour. She's going to stay a few days."

"OK."

"You're really OK with this?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stretched them.

"Tate and Mamo won't be. This is going to kill them. They are going to kill me." She put her head in her hands. "You don't understand."

It annoyed me that she thought I didn't understand. Our parents loved me, and they found me under a tree. I started to shake my head, but Roxy started talking again. "You went to bed," she said. "They yelled at me for two hours about cutting my hair before that *chav* comes."

"Your hair was pretty," I said, trying to explain, but she shot me a look.

"He's coming for me," she said. We stared at each other, the shock of saying the truth out loud a palatable thing. This was something we all knew, but we never said these things, just like no one ever said what I was. Roxy looked bolder and sadder. "I think they already made the deal," she said. "I think they already took my *bori* price."

"Mamo would never—"

"Oh, Kiz, don't be stupid," Roxy said. "It's different for you." She remembered my feelings and scanned my face. She grabbed my foot and squeezed it. "I'd trade places with you in a second."

I wanted to hide. Under the covers, my cabbage knees to my chest, my lineless hands over my smooth, shiny face. But I didn't. And couldn't. A girl my size hiding was even more ridiculous than the idea that a *chav* would choose me over my sister. That our parents would offer me up as a bride. "What's her name?" I asked. "You'd better get going to pick up—"

"Natalie." Roxy's mouth smiled when she said it, even though the rest of her looked pinched, panicked.

"Natalie," I repeated. "I won't tell Mamo and Tate. But you will have to."

"I'll be back," she said, and stood up to go. She smoothed down her pants and ran one hand through her hair.

"Roxy," I called, but she was already gone. I got out of bed and put on some sweats and a tee-shirt to clean up before they returned. I wound up emptying and scrubbing out the hot tub, replaying the conversation over and over in my head. *I'm a lesbian*, my sister had

said, and I answered, *So?*

I'm a lesbian, she repeated, and I asked, *So what? It's different for you,* she'd said. I scrubbed the tub until the ringing phone made me stop.

I could hear breathing on the other end of the line. "Whoever you are," I said, with a surprising amount of conviction, "stop fucking around." Then I hung up.

The hot tub shone in the lights from the trailer.

So what? Then I said it aloud. "So what? I'm an alien."

Ω

Roxy and Natalie tumbled over one another like puppies, trying to get ready. I'd tried to leave the trailer three times, but each time they whined at me, like somehow I was an integral part of the goings on, so I made myself as small as I could and stayed on my bed. Occasionally, a piece of clothing would get flung my way as they searched for this or that. I flicked back a lacy thong that landed by my foot in an attempt to participate.

"You should come with us, *Rovli*," Roxy said into the mirror, threading earrings into her lobes.

"Please do," Natalie added.

They meant it, which was sweet. I wanted to say yes. I actually liked the club where they were going. It was dark and loud, and the booths were big enough to swallow even me up.

I wanted to go. But when I opened my mouth to say yes, it came out as "No." *Yes*. My body wouldn't behave. My legs swung down and my arms leaned into a drawer and extracted a bent paperback. "I'll stay here tonight." *Yes.* "You two have fun."

"Are you sure?" Roxy clicked her tongue, disappointed. "*Na dara*, you aren't in the way."

My head nodded. *No*. "I know."

Roxy flopped next to and on top of me while Natalie laced up her boots. "*Voliv tut.*"

"I love you, too," I said.

The taxi honked. The two of them hugged and petted me and then left in a cloud of glitter and perfume.

As the sun sank, the volume rose. Traffic roaring on the freeway overpass above, late summer cicadas hiding among the fake flowers in Mamo's garden. Even the lake seemed to have a sound, the air loud with smells, fishy salt and tannins. I rolled open the trailer windows and lay back on my bunk, trying to read and half-hoping the phone would ring, then wishing it wouldn't.

I filled the clean hot tub and started the jets.

I tried not to feel sorry for myself. After all, I'd refused to go out

with the girls. I dropped my clothes there in the garden, acting as if the solitude was a gift. I sat in the tub and leaned back to look at the darkening, moonless sky, and when I was done, I dripped my way back to our trailer, dripped over the torrent of clothes until I found a towel. I wrapped myself up and slid into my bed.

When I lay down my head, the noise stopped. The world stopped. It just stopped.

It started again with a great shake, then smaller ones, rattling the trailer like an empty can. I held on. Earthquake. No, an accident on the freeway, just above, a semi breaking through steel guardrails. A tsunami. An explosion. A bomb, a solar flare. The switching of the magnetic poles. The apocalypse.

The trailer stopped shaking for a moment. Outside, the sky was darker than I'd ever seen. Then, shaking again, but this time, the air moved, thrumming and pulsing. I sucked in a breath and held it.

The air entered me like a demon. It was cold on my teeth, and as it traveled through me, my flesh jiggled separately from my bones. All my hairs—head, neck, and arms—stood up. It smelled like magnetized iron. Thin, strong beams of lights poked through the open windows, searching like fingers.

I pushed out the breath I was holding. It came out loud and angry, a sound I'd never heard. One blade of light found me, touched me, pulled me to my feet. I stood naked, as the light traced over me. It was alive, I was sure, and its touch was one of a blind family friend marveling at how I'd grown.

I slapped it away.

The light hit the wall, and the trailer rocked like a dinghy in a storm. Outside, the truck's horn honked and the motor revved. I held on as best I could, but was tossed to my knees. I pulled myself towards the door as the trailer pitched to and fro.

It felt like a vertical climb from my bed to the trailer door. But when I tumbled outside onto the ground, everything was oriented in the right direction: the ground was down, the trees grew up, and across the sky was the bottom of a spaceship.

The light blades searched for me again. I rolled into a ball and covered my head with my arms. The truck honked faster, revved harder, headlights flashing. Inside the trailer, Roxy's laptop switched on and off, blaring pieces of "Free Bird" through the speakers: "leave here tomorrow—remember me—be travelling on—got to see." The light found me, of course, stroked me gently in apology for frightening me. It ran through my hair and patted my shoulders, and, with magnetic fingers, tried to lift me up.

I didn't want to go. I stretched my full length and dug into the dirt and grass. I held onto my world. The light tried to pry me free, first

softly, then in frustration.

We struggled, my mother and I. She was the light. The more it touched me, the more I felt her. The light scolded and begged, and I held on. The light pushed, rolled across the ground like water, unleashing thunder that set off a rain shower of the windows' blunt safety glass.

"This is my home," I said or thought—it wasn't clear which—and the light gave a mother's sigh.

Then it was all over. They were gone for now, but they would be back. The truck's motor and headlights cut and the ship was gone. The trailer clattered as everything again surrendered back to gravity.

Everything was still. No traffic or cicadas, no honking or "Free Bird," a complete absence of sound except for my heart. The inside of my head felt bigger than the outside. I didn't move, didn't breathe. Rocks and glass and plastic stems pushed sharply into my knees and hands, but I didn't move until the air settled back, the lights switched on, and even then I waited for the first brave cicada to tentatively chirp, for another to answer, for traffic noise and the lake waves hitting the shore. Only then did I exhale and sit down. Right by my foot was the stuffed unicorn, as if it'd followed me out of the trailer. It was dirty and a little damp, but I hugged it close as noises began trickling back.

I didn't know how long I sat there. Without the moon as a reference, it could have been minutes or hours. I sat and watched the path, willing Roxy to emerge from the darkness. I sat until the air condensed, beading on my skin. My teeth chattered and I silenced them in the unicorn. Somewhere, inside one of the trailers, the phone rang three times in quick succession.

Ω

The footsteps were loud, glass and twigs crunching beneath them. Too heavy to be Roxy, but unmistakably human. Then, a silhouette, rectangular and male. Any other night and I probably would have been alarmed. But I was incapable of doing anything more than wiping my face on my unicorn, holding it as best as I could in front of my chest and calling out, "Hello?"

The silhouette stepped closer. The man was in his thirties, with a square haircut but young eyes, which struggled to adjust in the low light. I saw him first, but it took me the few seconds he needed to make me out to recognize him: Scott Lynn Miller, a loss prevention guard from the mall where I worked. It didn't make any sense why he was here. Before I could open my mouth, he'd come closer, asking if I was hurt.

"No," I answered. *Yes.* "What are you doing here, Scott Lynn

Miller?"

Then he realized I was naked. "Ahhh," he started. He seemed like he wanted to look, but he studied the ground. He held out his hand, his eyes still pointed the other way. "I came for you."

Unthinking, I took his hand, but jerked away in surprise and pain. My hands were deeply cut and sticky. Scott Lynn Miller then grabbed my wrists and pulled me up. I swayed on my legs. I noticed his knuckles had a few strong black hairs on them.

"You're all wet," Scott Lynn Miller said. He kept his hand on my arm to steady me. He looked past me at the yard. "And everything's a mess." Then he made a surprised face at the ground. "I'm sorry," he said. "Is this how it always looks?"

I saw the garden, littered with broken glass and scattered belongings, my and Roxy's trailer nearly upended. "No," I said, a little annoyed and ashamed. "There was a—" I thought for a second. "—an earthquake."

It'd felt like an earthquake.

Scott Lynn Miller furrowed his brow until it almost reached his chin. "An earthquake?" He shook his head. "I didn't feel a thing." He looked around again, still not looking at me. "But it sure looks like an earthquake. Or Katrina." He looked back at me. "You know I was in Katrina, right?"

I did. It was one of the few things I did know about him. But I didn't really care. I was naked, I was cold and exhausted, and it didn't make any sense that he was there. "What are you doing here, Scott Lynn Miller?" I asked a second time.

"You need to lie down," he said.

"That's my trailer," I answered, making a sloppy gesture to the upturned one, big enough to see in his peripheral vision.

"Whose are those?" he asked, jerking his chin at the others.

"My parents'. My aunt and uncle's, and my grandmother's."

"Are you alone?"

I started to nod, momentarily terrified. I didn't know why he was here. But then I remembered something else I knew about Scott Lynn Miller: he'd injured himself doing construction, and he was on a waiting list for the police academy. Which, I knew, did not in and of itself guarantee my safety in his presence, but there was also a freaking spaceship hovering above us somewhere containing my other, seemingly magnetic and destructive parents. "My sister's out with her girlfriend."

"Can you walk?" he asked, leading me a step towards my parent's trailer. I could, unsteady as a fawn. He led me, looking straight ahead at the door. He dropped my hand to push the door and looked away as I climbed the stairs, went inside, and fell onto Mamo and Tate's

bed.

Inside, it looked like nothing had happened. A few things had rattled off their hooks or shelves, probably when our trailer tipped, and Scott Lynn Miller hung a frying pan back onto a hook and picked a book up from the floor. “An earthquake?” he asked again.

“An earthqu—” I answered, interrupting myself with a yawn. Scott Lynn Miller unfolded the comforter from the edge of the bed and covered me. This time, I was sure he looked, but my eyes were closing.

I dozed intermittently, feverishly, without dreaming. I listened for Roxy over the strange Scott Lynn Miller sounds: boiling water for tea, flipping through one of Mamo’s self-help books, surfing through basic cable channels. I stirred when Roxy did return, but couldn’t tell the time—the sky was navy blue outside the roof panels.

Roxy yelled, “What the fuck?” and “Who are you?” and “Where’s my *phen*?” and then Scott Lynn Miller’s deep voice answered something I couldn’t make out. I thought I heard Natalie, too, as the voices softened to murmuring and blended into the surrounding noise, and I finally fell into a deep, empty sleep.

Ω

Hot morning sun streamed through the open roof panel, and I sweated awake. Scabs had set my hands into tender half-fists during the night. They cracked and leaked clear fluid when I flattened them.

I stepped over Scott Lynn Miller, asleep on the kitchen floor, using one of Tate’s slippers to prop his head. There was glass everywhere on the path, and I tested each step before putting down my weight. The ofisa door was ajar; inside, Natalie and Roxy curled together across the sofa bed.

They both snored up the smell of stale beer. I poked Roxy gently to wake her, and she rolled over, threw her arm over her eyes and made an unhappy sound. Then she sat bolt upright. “Rovli,” she said. “What a fucking mess.”

“I know,” I answered. I pointed to Natalie and Roxy shook her head, giving me secret sister signals that we would talk outside, in private.

“What happened to your hands?” she asked, when we got outside.

“It’s hard to explain,” I said.

“You’d better try.”

“I know,” I said.

We made our way through the garden. Roxy bent over and grabbed her foot. Off balance, she nearly fell over into the dirt. “Glass!” she yelled. “I got glass in my foot.” She stepped down on her heel and hobbled to the hot tub. I followed her, and we pulled ourselves up

onto the edge. I tried to pull the glass sliver from the ball of her foot, but my chewed-up hands wouldn't work right. She squeezed it out like a pimple and threw it over her shoulder.

I didn't say anything, but at that moment, she knew. She just needed something to remind her that she already knew. After all, we'd all been waiting for it.

"Oh, no," she said. "Oh, shit. Shit, shit, shit." Then she started to cry.

"It's OK," I said to her, not entirely sure it was. The words sounded hollow, but necessary.

"No," Roxy sniffed. "It isn't." She wiped her face and gave a strange smile. "You know what, Rovli? I am selfish. I don't want you to go." She grabbed my arm. "Partly because I don't want to lose you, but partly because I want to go. Natalie asked me to come home with her and I told her yes." She leaned in and placed her cheek on my shoulder. "I don't want you to go. I want to go. I want to be the one to go."

I placed my arm around her. "It's OK."

"No," she answered. "It isn't. I'm a terrible person. A terrible, selfish person."

"You aren't."

"Maybe." She pushed her face into the curve of my neck. "I don't really want to go," she whispered. "I just don't think I can stay."

We hugged one another and the crying started again. We cried for each other and for ourselves. And in that crying, neither of us heard Scott Lynn Miller walk up and watch us. I don't know how long he stood there, because I had my forehead against Roxy's short, soft hair. He waited patiently, apparently, until both of us seemed cried out before finally interrupting. "I'll stay and help clean up," he said, as if that was what we were discussing. "Don't worry."

We sat up and looked at Scott Lynn Miller. Roxy rubbed the back of her hand against her face like an eraser and waited for me to answer. When I didn't, she said to him, "You don't have to do that."

"I want to," he answered. "I have some experience in this. Kizzy probably told you."

Roxy shot me a secret sister look, a what-the-fuck-is-he-talking-about look, but she was gracious and a quick liar. "Of course she did. We'd appreciate the help."

"I'd like to talk to Kizzy, if I could," he said.

Roxy bristled a little, weighing whether to leave me or not. I prayed she wouldn't. But she didn't want to be there with him. "I'll make some coffee."

Scott Lynn Miller held out his hand to Roxy, to help her over a pile of glass by her feet. "That would be lovely."

Roxy gave me a quick sister's glance meaning that she'd be right back, and limped as gracefully as she could toward Mamo and Tate's trela.

Scott Lynn Miller hefted himself up on the side of the tub next to me. "I will help clean up," he said. "So don't be upset." He looked at me, at his feet, at me, then slid an arm around me.

"Scott Lynn Miller—" I started.

He dropped his arm. "I'd love for you to call me Scott."

"Scott Lynn Miller," I repeated. "What are you doing here?" Asking him for the third time.

He turned to face me. "Let me explain."

Even with some distance between us, he was altogether too close. I felt like I didn't have a choice. "OK, then."

He looked back at his shoes like what he wanted to say was written on them. "I have basically nothing to offer," he said. "After Katrina, well, even before Katrina, I didn't have anything. I mean, well, I do have *something*." He glanced up from his shoes. "I have a child, Dan." He paused to let that sink in, then continued. "Anyway, my ex moved Dan up here and after the storm, I followed."

"OK," I said. I wasn't sure what anything he said had to do with me.

"Anyway." He paused again, and shifted position. "Dan. I got Dan a goldfish like a month ago, and the goldfish just died, because, you know, goldfish just die. You've had a goldfish. You know what I mean."

I shook my head. "I never had a goldfish."

He smiled like I was joking. "Anyway," he continued. "So, Dan and I gave the fish a funeral. Dan was a little old for that, and did the whole eye rolling thing, but I could tell it was important. We stood over the toilet and I asked if Dan wanted to say a few words. And you know what the kid said?"

"What?" I looked at his hand, which was gripping the lip of the tub, awfully near my leg.

"Dan said the fish, Joe, Dan named him Joe, had a full fish life and was happy when he died, having done and accomplished every fishy thing he wanted to. My child said this." Scott Lynn Miller seemed impressed.

I shifted my position, which he took as a signal to continue.

"There's something about you," he said. "I didn't have the guts to ask you out beforehand and my kid, well, gave me the courage. I haven't done shit with my life yet, Kizzy. But I want to die happy." He looked back again at his shoes. "So I broke into Macy's personnel files to find your address."

I slipped off the edge of the tub hard onto my feet.

"It's probably a little creepy," he said. "But also, I hope, romantic." He looked around. "I tried to call you a bunch of times, but I never got ahold of you."

I broke into tears again. Scott Lynn Miller spread a goofy, clueless smile on his face as he put his arm around me again. I wanted to shake it off, push him away, into the glass. I wanted to scream and scare him away, but I couldn't find the strength or courage. I wished him away as hard as I could, but the harder I wished, the harder he embraced me. I didn't return the embrace, but it didn't matter. He breathed in and out in my hair and held me close, only releasing me when Roxy emerged from the trailer with a tray of Turkish coffees. Scott Lynn Miller finally let me go and took a cup. I could still feel the ghost of his mouth, hot and damp, on my head. He slurped down some coffee and smiled again at Roxy.

She shook her head at him and tried to read my face as I took a mug for myself. I don't know what she saw, but she turned and headed towards the ofisa with the remaining two cups on the tray.

"Anyway," he said. "It's not much of a story, but there it is. What do you think?"

When I didn't answer right away but instead buried my face into the steaming cup to take a long drink, he took it as tacit agreement, and put his arm back around me. "So why do you only have the front of a house anyway?" he asked, at the same moment music blasted from the ofisa across the yard. It was "Free Bird" again. "If I stayed here with you, girl…" he sang, and squeezed his arm around me tighter. "…things won't ever be the same." He looked at me. "I love this song."

Ω

Roxy, Natalie, and Scott Lynn Miller took turns in the gardening gloves, picking up the shards piece by piece and depositing them into buckets. My hands rendered me nearly useless. But I walked around and picked up the biggest pieces, pain be damned, grateful to be doing something instead of sitting with Scott Lynn Miller's arm around my shoulder.

Natalie and Roxy took over the glass-gathering process while Scott Lynn Miller and I righted the trailer, which landed back on the A-chassis with a great crash, smashing out the last intact window. We filled the six buckets we had and took a break, sitting together on the edge of the hot tub like a line of crows. We were debating where to dump the buckets when the *familia* came home. Early. No one heard them until they were already there.

Gracie stood with her hands on her hips and a grimace that looked like we'd lost her a bet. Uncle Marko held up Dei by one arm, while

Tate and Mamo stood behind them all, taking it in. The mess, the girls, the white boy, and me.

It was only a few seconds, enough for them to see Roxy grasping Natalie's hand and me leaning away from Scott Lynn Miller.

There is no word in Romani for whatever I was, but the one for Roxy Tate spit like poison. "*Pampuritsa*." The mess, the gadjo next to me, it didn't matter. Tate saw the girls' hands. "*Pampuritsa,"* he repeated.

I lost my breath at the sound, but Roxy puffed up. She aimed back at him, but Mamo stepped into the line.

"Your *Káko* Fatlip called off the wedding," she said. "We tried to call and when no one answered, I worried."

I had my breath again. "It was my fault. Let me explain…" I paused, not really sure what I was going to say. But no one was looking at me anyway.

Mamo walked towards the hot tub with both Natalie and Scott Lynn Miller in her sights. "I think it's time for you to go," she said to them. "Both of you." She started to reach for them, when there was a terrible boom.

And the sky went dark, like the end of a scene.

The moment before, Roxy was holding Natalie's hand. But now, in the dark, Natalie held Roxy's up over her head. Unnatural light pushed through her eyes like flashlights. They lit up her small face, perfect with a symmetry I hadn't noticed before.

Scott Lynn Miller's hand rested on my shoulder, heavy and dumb, like a bag of groceries.

I saw the shadows of my family, Tate roaring again with hateful words, *Káko* Marko lowering Dei to her knees, and my Aunt Gracie with fists by her side. Mamo holding the edge of the hot tub. I saw my sister with her hand held by an alien. We all had our mouths open like hungry babies.

Ω

There are alternate versions of the Lallah Pombo story. Uncle Fatlip's second wife, Hope, an Austrian Sinti, told a version where Lallah Pombo finds the rain, but when she returns, it is too late and all she has left are the stories of her people and what she has seen.

Other versions say that the rain, or a god or creator or a great sower in the sky, gave Lallah Pombo a choice; she could save her people and be left alone, or die with them. In one telling, her presence itself is what sets the whole world out of balance, but there are a number of other versions in which it isn't, though she is hung out to dry to protect someone else who actually instigated the crisis. In about a third of the stories, she sacrifices herself to save her

people and becomes the rain, or the god or creator and sower, or a star in the sky. In another third, her people sacrifice her to make things right; sometimes she fights to the end. Sometimes she goes willingly.

Ω

The ship was above us, but we couldn't see it. Instead, that darkest dark pushed down like a low ceiling while the air rubbed on us with a heavy, woolen charge. The truck and Tate's van honked together like a chorus of metal ducks, and "Free Bird" flipped on and off from Roxy's laptop, over in the ofisa: *"…must be travelin' on now…"*

Mamo understood. "They came," she said. "I can't believe they came." She looked at me, alarm coming off her skin like a fever. "They came to take you."

"We did," Natalie said. Her voice was large and merged together with the light from her eyes to become a thing in and of itself. "But now we are taking Roxana."

"…places left to see…"

Roxy snatched her hand back from Natalie and cradled it like a burn. "What do you mean?" she asked. "Taking me?"

"I asked if you would come home with me."

"You trapped me," Roxy said. "You lied."

"I didn't lie," Natalie answered. "I came for her, but fell in love with you."

"…you, girl…"

"It wasn't planned," Natalie continued. "But this project was designed with a rigorous desire for experiential knowledge. That requires loose margins." Natalie reached again for Roxy's hand, but she wasn't quite ready to give it again.

"…free as a bird now…"

Mamo wailed, Tate roared. Scott Lynn Miller clamped down on me with unexpected power and asked, terrified, "What is going on?"

I'd forgotten he was there. I slapped off his arm like it was a mosquito. The thing, Natalie's voice and light, hovered before me. It waited for me to say something, but I leaned around it and gazed at Natalie herself. The geometry of her face, the exaggerated pyramid of her fingers. I didn't see it but I hadn't been looking.

"We wouldn't take both," Natalie said to Mamo. "That is too cruel."

"I wasn't expecting this," Mamo said. "Not like this."

"No one was," Natalie said.

Our father came behind Mamo and held her shoulders. "You can't have her," he hissed, at Natalie, at the light.

Roxy took Natalie's hand again. "I'm not yours to give, Tate," she

whispered.

"And this bird you cannot change…"

"Kizzy is as human now as anyone," Roxy said. She kissed Natalie's hand. "I'm the alien."

"Lord knows, I can't change."

Ω

There is never a way to say goodbye. Roxy threw herself into my arms last. "Rovli," she whispered.

Then she stood next to Natalie and looked, one last time, at all of us.

I couldn't watch so I looked at the ground. The unicorn lay exactly where I'd sat the night before. I swooped for it and threw it at my sister, just as the light curled around them.

The unicorn bounced off the tube of light, and I caught it and yelled for Roxy. A hand—my sister's? Natalie's?—waved through the light like it was clearing away cobwebs, and I pushed the toy into the hand. It clasped the unicorn and pulled it in. Then they were gone.

We stood in the yard for a long time. We looked up until our necks ached, and then a little longer.

Scott Lynn Miller broke the silence. "I don't know what happened here tonight and I want some answers." He grabbed my arm. "What are you?" Rage and confusion made him careless, and he twisted at me, clasping hard on my battered hands.

"What are you?" he asked again and again, snatching at whatever he could of me. "What are you?"

I ducked him as best I could, but he kept coming. Tate stepped between us and picked up Scott Lynn Miller in his big hands and slammed him once against the side of the hot tub. If it'd been anyone else, the crack would have made me sick. Tate dropped him like a sack onto the dirt and broken flowers.

"What is she?" Scott Lynn Miller asked, his voice barely a whisper. He tried to find his bones and joints and push himself up.

Tate shoved him back down with his foot. "She's my little girl," he answered. "Now get the hell out of here."

I didn't watch him leave. I only know he did, muttering and confused. Tate stood between Mamo and I, his arms around us, as we all watched the sky again. Eventually, Gracie brought us out glasses of water.

I took the water from Gracie like I was coming out of a long dream. She stood next to me while I drank, and after a while she took my hand. She turned it over carefully and pulled up the bandages to look at my palms. "Kizzy," she said. "When these cuts heal, there's going to be deep lines."

Ω Ω Ω

Afterword: “Free Bird” is a section of a novel in progress, which follows an alien invasion of Earth, told from multiple viewpoints, including Kizzy, an alien test subject, who we meet here; Natalie, an alien sent to retrieve Kizzy, who falls in love with Kizzy’s sister; and Scott Lynn Miller, security guard and part-time father, who takes his knowledge of alien presence to paranoid new levels.

Impulse

Mary Elizabeth Burroughs

A table moved itself. But no one noticed because the paralyzed teenagers began to move at the same time.

It was dawn, a Monday morning, and peculiarly crisp and cool for Florida in July. Nurse Ida Winstone had just finished administering Devon's respiratory meds via his nebulizer when his sleeping roommate, Costas, a quadriplegic, scratched his nose. Ida was wiping down his mouthpiece when she caught sight of the movement. She froze, dismissing the vision as something induced by fatigue. Oh, she knew better than to trust the things she thought she saw at the tail end of a night shift. But then Costas raised his baby-like balled fist to his nose, uncurled a finger, and poked.

Nurse Ida shrieked.

Costas Kosmakos had been paralyzed from the neck down since a diving accident at Tarpon Springs that occurred when he was eight years old. Yet there sweet-eyed Costas was, scratching his nose after eight years of needing his attendants to do everything for him.

Devon Miller, 17, reflective, lower spine crushed after being accidentally struck by his grandmother's ancient Ford Taurus in Memphis, Tennessee, was propped up in bed and wheezing out the last of the foul aerosolized meds from his own nebulizer treatment. "You're awful loud this morning, ma'am," Devon said.

Nurse Ida stared at Costas.

Devon followed her gaze and, finally seeing what she saw, laughed. "Costas, you're moving!"

Costas grunted, too stubborn to wake, and turned over to face the wall. Entirely on his own.

"Bro, seriously—wake up, you're moving!" Devon was shaken but gleeful at the sight of his sleeping roommate's unexpected movement. He began applauding and kicking his feet—the sort of movement he'd last made when he was a five-year-old. It was a movement of essential delight, like kicking and clapping his hands over Oscar the Grouch on Sesame Street. Devon looked down at his legs but was too struck to say anything, after ten years of feeling like a boulder in his family's way and then two years at the facility. He looked over to

Nurse Ida for some small confirmation of what he was seeing, for her to tell him that it was, indeed, true.

All Nurse Ida could manage was a shake of her head. Her mouth hung open. Ida felt somehow defeated by her inability to comprehend why, let alone how, two paralyzed teen-aged boys could spontaneously exhibit signs of full mobility. She silently watched as Costas Kosmakos tossed and turned and Devon Miller lifted his legs.

With all the commotion within room 11, no one noticed the liveliness of Devon's comforter. It flicked its corner up, then down. It was excited, too. A magazine on the desk fluttered open its pages to a UNICEF advertisement. A water pitcher sitting in a puddle of condensation glided slightly to the right. The Luke Skywalker-as-Stormtrooper action figure sitting on the edge of Costas's proximity shelf took off its tiny white helmet, set it on its lap, and looked out at the room. Neither Nurse Ida, Devon Miller, Costas Kosmakos, nor anyone else in Liberty Shores Boarding School for the Disabled may have been registering various objects' tiny movements, but the objects were registering theirs.

≈

Classes, of course, were cancelled for the day. The phenomenon of the newly mobile students took precedence over routine. It was not just Costas Kosmakos and Devon Miller who could now move, it was all of the Liberty Shores boarding school's paralyzed students.

The deaf and blind teens spent most of their day in the lounge with tentative smiles on their faces. They played games of gin rummy, the deaf in a group with regular cards and the blind in their own group with Braille cards. As each and every one of them spread their cards out, they wondered if anything would happen to them, too.

The vinyl loveseat observed.

School support staff phoned parents to update them on their children's changed conditions. Had this been the doing of Liberty Shores' unimpeachable medical staff? Had Costas (or Devon, or any of the other 46 formerly mobility-impaired students) worked exceptionally hard in physical therapy sessions this quarter? Parents asked whatever question came to mind. "We simply don't understand," they'd bleat. "We'll be consulting with a team of specialists so as to determine the root cause, and we'll share any information we discover," was all the support staff could reply before hanging up.

How things could just change in an instant, marvelled the receptionist.

No one on staff thought to phone the other facilities for the disabled nearby. The office manager would have, had she not been

away vacationing in the Keys. If the school had not been in quiet panic mode they would have quickly discovered that they were not the only place housing especially lively charges.

Most of the newly mobile students practiced walking outdoors. Several attendants and volunteers trailed behind them in case the students' legs weren't as sturdy as they appeared. Some volunteers were teenagers like the students, and had been called in that afternoon and evening for "the situation," as administration was calling it. The volunteers occasionally huddled up, chirping about how hot this or that student was now that their face wasn't twisted up in anguish. To think that the Liberty Shores kids were just like them!

But then a sharp wind from high over the Gulf of Mexico gusted in, and dusk arrived.

The teens moved more boldly on their last laps along the lawn, aware that they were growing famished from these new ambulatory efforts and even yearning to devour the cafeteria's gelatinous jambalaya, moist chicken fingers, and by-the-box carrot cake with cream cheese icing. Stomachs groaned. Leg muscles ached.

April Wyatt, 16, hair hot-combed, eyebrow pierced, haughty, and formerly a ventilator-dependent quadriplegic, called out to ask whether the umbilical cord between herself and her matronly part-time attendant Jaime Velasquez had finally been cut when something else struck her as…*wrong*.

Just above the horizon, a plane dropped, falling out of the dusky sky.

April squinted. "Holy shit, Jaime—did I just see that?" She whirled around in order to grab her attendant's hand, but Jaime, for once, wasn't there.

Liberty Shores' attendants and teen volunteers had collapsed to the ground, and they were not moving. Not in the least.

"Jaime?" April asked. She dropped to her knees and reached out for Jaime's pudgy hand, which was draped over someone else's face.

The attendants' and volunteers' eyes darted around frantically searching for a sight to focus on while the rest of their bodies remained as unmoving as dusty mannequins in a storage closet.

A traffic helicopter crashed a quarter of a mile outside Liberty Shores' brick wall. Rich scents of gasoline inflamed the students' noses. April patted her arms, her chest, in search of some comforting tick, though she had none, as she'd never had the opportunity to develop any. She'd been paralyzed from the neck down for most of her life.

The students stood there, able to move, but not knowing where to go, what to do, or whom to cling to.

≈

Nearly all objects made by humans or worried over by people's fingers fidgeted of their own accord by sundown. The objects moved as the paralyzed teenagers first moved. In fits.

Outside Liberty Shores, a fallen pedestrian woman's bra unhooked itself and slithered from underneath the woman's shirt. It paused and patted her on the lips. Not to worry, not to worry. The woman wanted to scream. All she could manage to do was blink, breathe, and then saturate her panties with urine. The panties instantly twisted themselves to get away. The lacy, nude-colored bra crumpled and extended its length, inch-worming away across the street.

Plastic grocery bags jumped into the wind, riding the static-charged gusts out to sea.

Inside the home of a young couple, wind from an open window swayed a photo mobile hung over their infant's crib. Large black-and-white photographs of the mother (when she was pregnant, finally, after three unsuccessful in vitro attempts) and of the father (wearing his bachelor goatee) dangled from the photo mobile's clasps. It had been the mother's idea, the photo mobile. This way, the baby could be comforted by images of the family when she woke up throughout the night.

The photo mobile twitched awake in the cool evening air, opening its small metal clasps. The photographs, equally lively, fluttered down and into the crib, then at once sprang up again. The black-and-white images of the parents balanced on their edges, sensing that something was off—something besides their being able to move, to sense, to consider. Each photograph slowly pinwheeled over to the baby, who had yet to stir. They stuck their corners into the baby's chubby legs, trying to prod it awake, but the baby didn't respond to the photographs' worried nudges.

Pale dashes imprinted themselves on the baby's dark skin.

Annabelle Reece Spalding, a hearty nine pounds and seven ounces, was not going to move. Not only had she been paralyzed when the sun went down, like all other able-bodied persons, but her small heart had shorted-out due to the strange electric burst accompanying the paralysis. It had ceased beating.

The befuddled photographs, however, did not know this. They kept vigil over Annabelle's body while her now-paralyzed parents lay wide awake one room away. The baby monitor, which connected to the receiver in Annabelle's parents' room, only sputtered static. The new parents had no clue that their child was dead, let alone any idea of what was happening to them.

The photo mobile did. But because it had never done anything before, it had no idea what it should do now. So it chose to spider up

its fishing line and run away from such decisions.

Outside, garbage cans frantically rolled around, emptying their contents. Clumps of like items grouped themselves together.

A wandering state-of-the-art, Japanese-manufactured sex doll looked around. Her name was Selma, and she registered that most every formerly inanimate thing was struggling to move or successfully wandering wherever the inclination took it.

Selma's velvet leopard print belt began to rebel, so she knelt down and yanked it out of her shorts' loops. She put the belt to the ground and it rubbed its buckle over her ankle in deep gratitude.

Trembling wads of used handkerchiefs creased with snot stumbled over and swiped themselves across her silicone toes. Marbles with children's chocolaty fingerprints smudged upon their surfaces rolled over to Selma and rubbed her heels. Sopping wet sweatpants crawled out of the ditch, ready to embrace her. She was so like a person! So like a person, yet so attentive!

A clump of ill-used Barbies destined for a local charity climbed out of their cardboard box. They spotted Selma. Some tiptoed her way, gathering at her feet like puppies huddling under their mother. The other Barbies remained near the box and clutched each other, burying their faces in each other's glossy synthetic hair, afraid to move on their own. Some stray Greek worry beads clacked up and down, hopping really, in their desperate need to reach her delicate fingers and be stroked by her.

So many things were coming over to touch or rub her, it made Selma feel she must pause and receive them as a dignitary. She waited as the parade of objects queued, and she raised her hands in welcome. How things can change all of a sudden, she thought. How things can suddenly be different forever.

Dancing in the Shadow of the Once

Rochita Loenen-Ruiz

They came with their big ships, riding through the rifts in the Veil that protected the Once-country. We could not say if it was capture or salvation that came to us. They, who we called Compassionate, came for us and took us from the devastation left behind. Of the great number that was the Once-tribe, only a handful of us were left. We watched as the world we knew and loved vanished in the chaos created by the rifts. And as we departed the Once-country, we wondered if we would ever see it again.

—From Artifact Hala's account, "Chaos and the Once-Country"

Hala's joints creaked as she unfolded herself from the regeneration egg. She paused and waited for her augmentations to adjust before moving again. Consciousness thrummed through her, a constant susurrus of memories through which she could sift and select when it was time for her to stand before her audience.

A visit to Ay-wan was in order, she thought. Hala's inner self was always comfortingly chaotic, always thrumming with the reminder of what she was, but there was something about the chaos that disturbed her now.

Ay-wan would know what to do. If there was anyone who would pinpoint an error in her augmentations, it would be he.

She pondered Ay-wan briefly. When she'd arrived on Silhouette, he had been among the first to greet her. He had been old already, the lines of his face telling a story of grief and joy and inevitable sorrow.

"They've assigned you to my care," he'd said. And he'd taken good care of her all throughout the augmentations, the installation of her arrays, and the surgical procedures that the Compassionate deemed necessary.

They'd sent him to the shapers for a complete rejuvenation five years ago, and now the skin of his face was stretched tighter than the skin of a drum. It was eerie to see him looking that way—not young, not old, more like a construct.

Her body signaled its readiness for movement. With a sigh, she

swung free of the egg and walked towards the mirror. They'd added more transmitters to her array in this most recent surgery, and she was thankful that they'd chosen to set the connectors close to where her hairline ended. It was less unsightly this way, and it allowed her the temporary illusion of ordinariness.

"Old," she thought as she stared at her reflection. Her hair, once compared to midnight by the young men of her tribe, still shone; but there were silver tendrils among the black, and it was impossible to hide the crinkles at the side of her eyes.

"So what," she said to the mirror. "Age is a badge we wear with honor."

In the old days, the *Munhawe* came into the fullness of their power in their elder years. The patient growing into wisdom, the waiting and the watching as the years passed, smoothing down the sharp-edged impatience that was youth—all these necessary things took time.

But with the Once-country fallen into chaos and with the Compassionate dominating the worlds where the remnant of the Once-tribe were allowed succor, there wasn't really any need to consider anything more than the roles that had been assigned to the remnant.

She hadn't had the luxury of time to grow into the fullness of her power. Instead, the Compassionate representative had her fitted with tiny little machines that crawled around inside her body, and an array of receivers and transmitters so she could tap into that source from which the *Munhawe* drew their wisdoms, their dreams, their prophecies, their healings, and the skill to carry the weight of history and legend.

Artifact.

That was the title they gave her along with the rest of those who had been rescued. They had all been tested and fitted with whatever augmentations the Compassionate saw fit to grant them, and then sent out to various worlds under the protection of Compassionate attachés.

In the beginning, she'd wanted to know where the others had been sent. But the attaché had looked at her with his cold blue eyes and told her that she should be honored to be selected as Artifact representative on Silhouette.

She'd accepted the reprimand, but she still missed her friends and wondered what had happened to the others.

She pressed her lips together and walked towards the console that projected her daily schedules. She was to appear at a benefit tonight. Funds were being raised for refugees located in various Once-worlds. She brushed away her nostalgia and her longing and tried to flow into the role that had been impressed on her.

No matter how hard she tried, no matter how much she reasoned with herself, she couldn't help but feel that she was nothing more than a museum exhibit trotted out for display every now and then. A trophy belonging to the Empire, a being that should have long ago been declared obsolete, but by some miracle still walked and talked, told stories and conjured visions of a place that might just as well be nothing more than a fairytale.

She folded her hands together in the proper form and moved from her bedroom. Her implants whispered loudly of memory, but she ignored them for now. They would quiet down as the day progressed, and hopefully she would reach the state of calm that she needed each time she had to stand before a crowd.

Her stomach grumbled. Augmented or not, she was human and her body still desired food.

ζ

"So good of you to be here," the organizer of the 19:00 hour event gushed at her. "So many entry chips sold. There's bound to be a good audience. You'll want the dressing room first, I suppose?"

She had difficulty concentrating on the organizer's four faces. Four on one, she thought. And she had a silly vision of bears piled up on top of each other as they strove to maintain balance on a one-wheeler, or wait, was it a two-wheeler? The memory did not belong to the history vaults of the Once-tribe, and it slipped through her fingers quicker than she could say fish.

It's not the Once-tribe's story all the time, she thought. *Artifact I may be, but it doesn't mean I can't have memories of my own.*

She nodded and smiled as the organizer rushed her off in a flurry of nervous gasps, fluttering fingers, and repeated bowing.

The dressing room was bigger than her living room. A long line of mirrors fitted with muted lights greeted her. Enhancers were plugged into the sockets—all on standby. Perhaps there was another performance after hers?

She sat down at one of the tables and unpacked the satchel she'd brought. The long length of woven cloth shone at her. Red and white threaded through with yellow, green, purple, and black—the traditional wear of the Once-tribe's Munhawe.

"This will be yours when your time comes."

Her memory of her mother wearing the same colors came back to her so vividly she didn't see the mirror she gazed at. A year later, her mother had been dead, one of the countless victims of the bombings that took place after the Charter changes. They'd brought her back in a sealed casket, the skirt too tattered to be passed on.

Hala pushed back the memory. She smoothed her fingers over the

woven cloth. They'd had this made for her, and she could tell that the cloth had been enhanced.

She frowned and stared at her reflection. A deep breath and the connectors beneath her skin slid into view. There was no help for it. She'd never learned meditation the right way, and without her augmentations, she couldn't enter the veils. She'd tried and failed to do so before.

"Are you all settled here?"

The four-headed organizer peered around the edge of the half-open door.

"Settled," Hala said. "Just getting myself psyched up."

"Good, good," the organizer said. Her faces smiled, and one of them whispered something to the other. "Do you want something to eat perhaps, or to drink?"

"Ginger tea?" Hala asked.

"It will be arranged," the organizer said. "How much time will you need? The crowd isn't here yet, but the primary sponsors will be in before the rest."

"Half an hour," Hala said.

It was disconcerting to watch the heads consult each other. After one of them whispered directives into a headpiece, all four nodded.

"Fifteen minutes, then, to mingle with the primaries. Your tea is coming. I'll check up on the other arrangements."

She watched as the organizer left. Her heads bobbed from side to side and her hands gesticulated at each other. At least the organizer would never lack for company, Hala thought. And she would never want for someone to talk to when the nights grew long and dark and lonely.

The door to the dressing room slid open again, and this time one of the stewards came in. It was her tea, piping hot and filling the room with the sweet scent of ginger.

"Thank you," Hala said.

The steward nodded and departed as smoothly as he had entered, and Hala was alone again. She sighed, lifted the cup to her nose and inhaled.

"Ah," she said.

The aroma brought back memories of her childhood and the mother who brewed ginger tea each time she had to do a long reading.

She blew on her tea and sipped at it. It was good. Better than any she'd ever had before. She wondered briefly if the kitchen had a source and if they used real ginger instead of the amalgam that was available in machines for the masses.

Twelve hours spent in meditation.

Twenty-four hours spent replenishing her energy supply.

She was spruced up as well as she could ever be for an Artifact who was almost a septuagenarian.

She had prepared. Yes she had. But this question….

"I beg your pardon?" she said, and she tapped the connector under her right ear discreetly.

Surely there must be a malfunction.

"I said, are you poor?" The woman who asked the question had a psychedelic array of hair plumes rigid with techno-spray, glittering under the bright lights of the dome.

"There's no need to be shy," the woman went on. "We see it on the news and we read it in the pages. The Once-country is sunk in poverty and Chaos holds sway over what remains of the populace. Without the Compassionate, there wouldn't be anything left of it by now. Want to see my display?"

Fragrance filled Hala's nostrils as the woman invaded her space.

"Look," the woman said.

Her screen flashed and the images appeared.

She knew what the vid was, of course. She'd seen them repeated countless times—and no matter that there was truth in the desolation shown on-screen, the Once-country was not all about mud and rain and blank-faced hopeless people living on Central City's streets.

"I came from a good family," Hala said as the vid came to an end.

"Oh." The woman seemed disappointed. "So you're not poor?"

Hala shook her head.

"But…"

"How do you measure poverty anyway?" Hala said. "What about yourself, do you consider yourself rich or poor?"

The woman took a deep breath and leaned away from Hala. Censure was in every line of her body.

"Well, I never," the woman said. "And we're doing all these things for you and your people. I should think you'd at least be a little grateful."

Hala sighed as the woman left her in a puff of sweet-smelling perfume.

"Well," said a voice behind her. "That's that then, and I suppose we can wave goodbye to a sizeable contribution from her. You do know how to deflate the pretentious, Hala."

She turned around and let out a squeal of joy.

"Bayninan! How—Why—when did you arrive?"

She fumbled for words not knowing what to ask first. The last time she'd seen Bayninan was when the Compassionate decreed that Hala would be sent to Silhouette. Bayninan's protests at the selection and segregation of the blooded had been rejected.

Hala was “blooded”—of the blood—and as a true descendant of the Munhawe she was expected to be an ambassador of goodwill, an Artifact. What flowed in the veins of the blooded was priceless, and could not be entrusted to a planet still embroiled in the Chaos. For all that Bayninan was of the warrior class, she was deemed unfit to stand as companion to an Artifact. So she had been assigned to a different planet.

“I arrived two hours ago,” Bayninan said. “A short sleep, and here I am. Fresh and fine and happy to be here in your time of need.”

Hala threw her arms around the taller woman.

“I thought I’d never see you again,” Hala said.

She pushed back the tears and the joy that threatened to overwhelm her.

“It took a long time to get myself into the representative’s good books, and equally long to get myself enough credits to come here. I did promise I’d find you,” Bayninan said. “You do remember that, don’t you, Hala?”

Hala smiled up at her. There was silver in Bayninan’s hair, but the arms that embraced her felt strong and sure.

“How many years has it been?” Hala said. “I’m old and in need of a tune-up. You, on the other hand, look distinguished and very fine.”

“You’re not old,” Bayninan replied. “You’re at the right age.”

Hala grimaced. Trust Bayninan to pick out what Hala was most insecure about. Even when they were growing up, Hala never needed to put her feelings into words. Bayninan simply knew.

“I’ve been the right age forever,” she said. “And look.”

She tucked her hair behind her ears so Bayninan could see where the shapers had given her more connectors.

“There’s a slot at the back as well,” Hala continued. “That’s for maintenance when my receptors get foggy or some such technical thing that I don’t really understand.”

“My poor Hala,” Bayninan said. “You’ve suffered by yourself.”

“It hasn’t been all bad,” Hala said.

Bayninan smiled and leaned down to touch her forehead to Hala’s.

“Well, I’m here now, and I’ll be here for as long as you need me.”

ζ

Colorful clothing is worn by the upper class, including the Munhawe, the Mama-oh, the Mumbaki, and the Chief of the Once-tribe. Belts carved from the teeth of the wild boar or from the crocodile are also an indication of class status. The white woven blouse with colorful embroidery is a later addition to traditional wear. Before the coming of the Compassionate, the women of the Once-tribe adorned their upper bodies with intricate beadworks. Breasts were displayed with pride.

The elder poet Sunyang wrote of the breast that sustains the life of the young.

“A woman’s breasts are her adornment

Honorable and pure

They are the expression of the woman’s modesty

For they are also the fountain of life.”

—From Artifact Hala’s talk, “Life in the Once-tribe”

It was the same spiel and yet it was different somehow. Bayninan was here. Her heart leapt and sang, and her joy in their reunion manifested in a projection of goodwill.

“A beautiful poem,” the organizer said.

Her words pulled Hala from the haze of joy. She was on the podium, and the first sequence of her presentation was over. Beside her, the organizer beamed while the audience nodded and murmured to each other.

“Yes,” Hala said. “The poem is lovely.”

“And you agreed to show us a dance,” the organizer prompted.

“Indeed,” Hala said.

How could she have forgotten? She had intended to show them the communal dance, but her heart cried out for something more.

“It will be a celebratory dance,” Bayninan said from beside her.

“Oooo….” the organizer said. She clapped her hands and her heads bobbed with excitement.

Hala stood there, her eyes riveted on Bayninan.

“Where will you find the garb of a warrior?” she choked out the words.

“I brought my brother’s gear,” Bayninan said. “It will do just as well as my own.”

Was there a tinge of sorrow in Bayninan’s voice? Hala wanted to ask her why she had Lakay’s clothes with her, but before she could speak, the organizer swept Bayninan away.

“You must prepare,” the organizer twittered. “How exciting and how fortuitous that you arrived on this day.”

ζ

Hala listened to the organizer’s excited announcements. She’d thought she had taken all the shock she could take in a day. But here was Bayninan looking every bit the warrior. The loincloth revealed

the muscled length of her legs; her breasts were barely covered by the warrior's vest. A blanket was slung around her shoulders, and the ivory of her belt bore the yellow sheen of age.

"I never thought I'd see you wearing this again," Hala said.

"Two women in skirts cannot dance the dance of blanket-sharing," Bayninan replied. "For tonight, let me be your warrior."

Was this Bayninan? Hala wondered. She watched as her friend walked with an easy gait to the other side of the podium. She bent down and picked up a shield and a spear. There was a smile in her eyes when she turned to look at Hala, who stood there staring at her.

"Well?" There was the lift of the eyebrow and the sardonic twist of the mouth.

She'd never seen Bayninan like this before, never thought of what it meant for Bayninan to be one of the fighting women of the Once-tribe.

ζ

First, the warrior dances to show off his prowess for his chosen one. He leaps and jumps around the fire and with his gestures, he lets the chosen one know that he has hunted for her, he has fought for her, and he has triumphed for her.

—Acts of Courtship, *compiled by Munhawe Sunyang Chulipa*

It was the courtship dance. Even as her lips spilled out the words, she could not stop staring at Bayninan.

In Bayninan's hands, the prop became a weapon. She thrust at the ground in rhythm with the gongs. It was like watching the rite performed as it was in the days when the Once-tribe still was its own. The Warrior leapt and spun and landed in a crouch, her eyes were fierce beneath the hooked beak of the bird's head she wore as a headdress. Bayninan was the warrior now, and when Hala met her eyes, she couldn't explain why she suddenly felt as if she were prey.

Thrust and retreat. Bayninan's muscles gleamed like polished mahogany beneath the domed lights. There was the flex and the give, and she drew the blanket from around her shoulders to shake it out.

It was the invitation.

Hala's hands twitched. She fed music into the air through her array: the song of the lover's flute twined with the rhythm of the gongs. Her feet shifted. Bayninan's eyes gleamed at her over the edge of the blanket.

A lover's dance, Hala thought.

She looked at her old friend in wonder and allowed herself to succumb to the call of the gong. As she circled the imagined fire with

the coyness of a maiden, she couldn't help but think of how very right Bayninan was. What better dance was there to celebrate this moment? Here, in the shadow of the gods, she was reunited with the one she loved the most. Bayninan's blanket closed around her shoulders, and she turned to accept its embrace in the way a maiden accepts the invitation of her first lover.

ζ

If I opened my palms to you
Would you touch your palms to mine?
If I reached out my hands
Would you take them
Would you give me the meaning to this life?

—"Song of the Maiden," Oral Records of the Once-Tribe

Rain seldom came to Silhouette, but it was here now. It poured down on the glass dome and spilled over into the ground beyond the domes where Silhouette's forest thrived in an atmosphere that was alien to and yet somehow similar to the Once-country they'd left behind.

Their celebration dance reached its end. Bayninan's hand was warm around her own. They clasped hands briefly before they parted and Hala stood alone again. She turned to face the wall. The crowd was at her back, and she could hear the wave of whispers. From soft wonderings the whispers grew into a crescendo of awe.

This, she thought, is for the Once-tribe.

She allowed her sight to blur as she accessed her array and passed through into the memory of the veils.

Here, in the space where the dance was born, she was alone. Here was the wind and the sky and the earth beneath her.

She paid obeisance to the sun as the song of the distant gongs coursed through her and filled the hall with their resonance. Her limbs trembled as the rhythm moved through her.

Tong-a-lit.

Her naked feet warmed the grey stone floor.

Even here, so many light years away from the Once-country, her spirit was connected to the earth and the sky. To the remembered horizon filled with the majesty of mountains and the green, green gold of ripening rice. She raised her arms in a gesture of remembered welcome.

"Come wind," she whispered.

Energy moved in her. It travelled through her bones, it moved through her flesh. She was aquiver with fire and lightning, bursting to the brim with the stories of beginnings.

Her ears resonated with the voices of the tribe sisters and the et-et-du of the Once-tribe.

The gate to the veil's inner sanctum opened up and she walked into its familiar embrace.

Her people had wandered the Once-country long before the Compassionate came. It wasn't that they owned the land so much as the land owned them.

They tended her with care, they plowed her fields and channeled her waters, they built their homes from what the land gave them and ate what the land brought forth. Season in and season out, the cycle went on in that way. Small wars were fought, alliances were made, and the Once-tribe grew as the gods meant it to. Their borders extended, their influence increased, their warriors were able hunters, and their women were strong in spirit and resilient in their minds.

The land was fecund and green and all manner of life grew there; even the spirits thrived and made their homes in the caves hidden by falls of water, and in rocky shelters where ferns and wild orchids grew.

There was the yell of children as they sprang from cliff into deep pools of green. Green, green, and around them, the bright smell of tiger grass and wild lilies—here the pitcher plants grew in profusion, and the maiden's slippers swung in the wind as if waiting for the day when they would be released from the stem.

Beyond the pools of deep green, tall trees towered into the sky, and further in—

A voice called to her from the familiar green. A voice filled with melancholy and remembrance, summoning her and telling her to shed her fears and embrace what waited beyond the portals of this place.

"Sacrifice," the voice whispered.

At the sound of that voice, she blinked and she was back again. The hall was quiet. Sometime during the performance, she had turned to face the crowd. Now everyone was staring at her, and the look in their eyes sent a frisson of fear through her.

She had never experienced anything like this before. What had she said? What words had she chanted?

Below her the organizer's four heads had their eyes closed. Their mouths hung open, and the multitude of hands stretched upward, open as if waiting for some gift.

"I—" her voice failed her, and the crowd stirred as if waking from a deep, collective dream.

"It's all right." Bayninan was there again.

Hala felt suddenly tired. As if all the energy she'd stored up had been spent and she was nothing more than an empty husk.

“You did well,” Bayninan whispered. “Just lean on me.”

She was grateful for the words and grateful for her friend. She stared down at the crowd. They were wearing smiles now, but all she could think of was the look in their eyes when she’d come out of the trance. Like predators waiting for the first twitch.

She shivered and Bayninan wrapped the blanket around her.

“Here,” Bayninan said. “A pod is waiting for us. We can go home now.”

ζ

Hala woke to the sound of Bayninan’s chanting. She burrowed deep in the cocoon of blankets and sheets, feeling as if she were young again and on the verge of a discovery.

“Et-et-doh-oh-oh, hi Bugan najawitaa-aha-aan….”

When they were younger, they followed the words of the chant, longing for the day when they would join the other chanters.

“Learn the words,” her auntie said.

But by then the old language was so overlaid with the new that the words to the chants might just as well have been in an entirely different tongue.

“It doesn’t matter what they mean,” her auntie replied when Hala asked what the words meant. “Just memorize the words.”

Hala had grown tired of it, but Bayninan had loved it. She remembered the serious look on Bayninan’s face, her dedication to the exact holding of a tone and the measured beat of the chant.

Bayninan would have been a far better Munhawe. She would have fulfilled the duty with skill, no matter that she was not of the blood. Bayninan would have remembered the things that Hala would have forgotten without her augmentations. But the blood did not run in Bayninan.

“I love the chants,” Bayninan had said. *“But I love the hunt and the chase more than I love the movements of the dance.”*

Even when she’d been chosen, Hala had been conscious of her shortcomings. She was not a full-fledged Munhawe, and yet with the implants in her body, she could fulfill that role perfectly.

Lulled by the warmth and by the sound of Bayninan’s voice, she fell back asleep, sinking into a dream of a bygone time. Her mother stood by the fire, stirring a pot filled with warm porridge. Her mother had no grey in her hair, and she was chanting as she always did when a great event was about to take place.

“Coming of age,” her mother said.

She looked up from the pot. Her smile was gentle, and she beckoned with her hand to Hala.

“Come, inhale the spices,” her mother said. “The smoke will

cleanse your spirit."

"It's just porridge," Hala said.

"Is it?" her mother asked. "Is that all you think it is? Or is that all you will allow yourself to see?"

"I don't understand," Hala said.

"Come," her mother said. "You must look deeper and understand if you don't wish to die."

"Death," Hala said.

She closed her eyes and thought of death. She wondered if a dirge would be sung for her and she wondered if Bayninan would sing the *hudhud* for her burial. Would the Compassionate even allow it? A three-day dirge for an Artifact from the Once-tribe, for an exile from the Once-country—pain pierced her kneecap as she fell to the ground, and her eyes flew open.

"This is what I was telling you about," her mother's voice whispered through the trees.

She was in a forest now. It was the same one in which she'd played as a little girl. Clusters of ferns rose up above her, and beyond that the fat trunks of trees and the sheltering fronds of pine and banyan.

"Mother," she whispered.

"Understand," her mother said. "You must open your eyes, Hala."

ζ

"Hala."

Bayninan's voice was loud in her ears, waking her once more. She blinked and rolled out of bed in a tangle of blankets and pillows.

"What?" she said.

"There's a man here for you," Bayninan said. "He says his name is Ay-wan."

She stared up at Bayninan. Her eyes saw her mother still, and her ears rang with her mother's last admonition.

"Who?" She said.

"A man," Bayninan said. "He said his name is Ay-wan. He says you called for him."

Was it her imagination or did Bayninan put more emphasis on the word "man"?

"I know him," Hala said quickly. "Send him in."

ζ

Of course, there is the business of death and the dying
But before that comes the litany of grief

—Rituals of the Once-tribe, *compiled records*

“It’s the augmentations,” Ay-wan said.

He had spent the good part of an hour testing her reflexes. He sat opposite her now, his connector plugged into the slot at the back of her neck.

She tried to gauge his thoughts, but ever since his change it was as if there were a curtain pulled over his emotions.

“What’s wrong with them?” Hala asked.

Ay-wan sighed and disconnected himself.

“You’re breaking down,” he said. “It’s not unexpected but still….”

Hala pushed her hair back into place and breathed out in a huff.

“So impatient,” Ay-wan murmured. “Your augmentations are deteriorating faster than they should. They’re meant to last longer than human years, but the way yours are going they’ll be corrupted in less than a year.”

“What does that mean?” Hala demanded. “Speak in words that I can understand.”

“You’re dying,” Ay-wan said. “And you’ll be dead before year’s end unless we take out your augmentations.”

“Dying…” Hala’s voice trailed off. She stared at Ay-wan willing him to change his diagnosis.

“We can always remove them,” Ay-wan said. “They’re not connected to your life support systems.”

“But—” she couldn’t finish.

Without the augmentations she wouldn’t be the Artifact anymore. She wouldn’t be able to access the knowledge that she needed to access. She would lose her ability to chant and to sing and to speak the old language. Would she even remember the steps of the dance once they were taken from her? A chilling thought came to her. Who would she be if she lost the ability to function as the Artifact?

“It’s not an easy choice,” Ay-wan said.

His fingers rubbed at the edges of his face. The skin there was pulled tight like skin over the surface of a drum.

“When you had your change,” Hala asked. “Was it easy or difficult?”

Ay-wan turned towards her.

“What do you think?” he asked.

She met his gaze, and she flinched at the pain and the loneliness in his eyes.

“I am the last of my people,” Ay-wan said. “This is the suffering I undertake in memory of what once was.”

ζ

There have been some side-effects noted. Hallucinations and hysteria are common to those given augmentations. The stronger the blood that

runs in the Artifact, the stronger the reaction.

—"Augmentations and their Side-Effects,"
Medical Journal, Suguran Foundation

"One more appearance this week," Hala said.

Twice this week, she'd hibernated inside the regeneration egg.

Twice, she'd given Bayninan a lie.

"It's what I always do before and after an appearance," she'd said.

She didn't know if Bayninan believed her, but she saw the sadness in her friend's eyes.

"Where are we going?" Bayninan asked.

"You don't have to go," Hala said.

Bayninan's lips formed a grim line.

"Didn't I make myself clear already?" Bayninan said.

Hala avoided Bayninan's eyes.

"I'm not a child," she said. "Not an invalid. I don't need a babysitter."

"Foolish," Bayninan said. "Who told you that I look at you as a child or an invalid?"

Hala turned away from Bayninan.

"Do what you want," she said.

Her vision blurred and she caught herself before she stumbled. Behind her, she heard Bayninan mutter a curse. Then Bayninan's arms were around her, steadying her and helping her over the threshold.

"Why won't you share with me?" Bayninan said. "Whatever it is, you're not alone anymore."

For a moment, she was tempted to tell Bayninan. How easy it would be to let this warrior be her strength. She flinched and pulled away from Bayninan's hands.

"I'm fine," she said. "It's just a temporary glitch. Nothing that can't be resolved."

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She faced herself in the mirror, willing herself to be calm. For tonight, she'd chosen to put on the clothing she'd received on the day of her birth. The skirt had been woven by one of the foremothers—the patterns more intricate than the patterns on the skirt she normally wore to such gatherings. There were no enhancements in the cloth, but it wasn't as if she needed enhancements in her clothing when her entire body hummed and bristled with the arrays installed by the Once-rule.

She brushed her hand over the horsehair that encircled her waist.

She could feel the patterns woven into it—subtle figures embossed with skill in the same dark color as the band. Ivory buttons yellowed by age ran along the length of the belt and dangled down to where the edges of her skirt met and folded over each other.

It was the mark of her class. Out of deference to the Compassionate, she'd donned a vest, but over that, she wore a heavy necklace of bamboo beads and precious bloodstone. She had never worn it before, and perhaps it was a sign of her augmentations' breakdown because when she'd picked up the necklace, it had burned her. An image came into her mind, very sharp and very clear, of her mother wearing the same necklace, her eyes closed and her lips moving as if in prayer. Then it faded away. The feeling was like touching the edge of a memory that belonged with the piece. There was a message waiting there, she thought.

"The pod is here." Bayninan's voice broke into her thoughts.

She unclenched her hands and pulled herself away from the haze that beckoned.

"I'm ready," she said.

She met Bayninan's gaze. Was it only a few days ago that she'd been filled with such joy at their reunion? Why couldn't she dredge up even the slightest bit of that emotion now?

"I suppose you don't want me to be your warrior tonight," Bayninan said.

There was regret in Bayninan's smile.

Hala shook her head, her fingers reaching up to touch the deep red of the blood stones.

"Not tonight," she said.

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Ay-wan's words haunted her while she shook hands and greeted political dignitaries from Silhouette's neighbor worlds. There were the ambassadors, clustered together in a circle, their wives dressed in sparkly costumes made up of tiny particles drenched in silver shine or platinum flair.

This suffering I undertake. Ay-wan's words ghosted around her, overlaid with sorrow. As if the man who had spoken them wanted to say that given a choice, given descendants, he would have chosen something else.

She smiled and shook hands with the Consul from the Once-place named Siargao. A circlet of many-colored stones revolved above his head. An independent island, Siargao had been given the ultimatum to ally themselves with the Empire or risk destruction. There were tales of a hidden power in Siargao, but it had put up no struggle and had signed the treaty.

“Ah,” the Consul said. “So, you are the much-spoken-of Artifact. One of those rescued from the Chaos that plagued the Once-Country, so the Compassionate attaché says. You will honor us with a dance perhaps. Maybe a telling or a showing of what it was like in your country before the Chaos took it?”

Hala smiled and murmured something noncommittal. It would not be good to offend one of the Empire’s political allies. How she acted here would influence whatever privileges the Once-tribe had wrestled from the Compassionate.

“Never let it be said that we are not kind.” Hala turned at the sound of the Compassionate attaché’s voice.

The smile on his face was hard as glass. All his teeth showed, and chills shot down her spine.

“Artifact Hala,” the attaché said. “You’ve laid a good basis for our work here.”

She couldn’t bring herself to make a civil reply. She tried to speak polite words.

“You will give us a good performance tonight, won’t you?” the attaché continued.

She opened her mouth, her mind flailing about for words.

“I—” she said.

“Yes?” There was a curious look on the attaché’s face.

“I do this for the Once-tribe,” she said. “In memory of the Munhawe and the Mama-oh who are lost to us.”

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In memory….

The words wrapped themselves around her like an embrace. The air around her seemed to coagulate into a hazy curtain through which she could see colors and hear snatches of words, music, and laughter.

And then, the gongs were pounding in her ears…

“Artifact,” a voice pierced through the haze and she blinked and looked up into the face of the blue-haired representative from a place whose name she couldn’t remember.

What he thought when she simply looked at him, she didn’t know. Perhaps he thought she had gone into a trance induced by her boosters. She felt his hand at her elbow, knew he was moving her to where she was more visible.

On display again.

She shook her head at the whisper and tried to focus. Who had said those words? Vicious anger rose up inside her. If this were the Once-country, if this were the Once-tribe, she would demand satisfaction.

Artifact. Relic of a dead tribe.

Her head was pounding again, and images superimposed themselves on the present. She could hear the gongs; she could smell the wood smoke. Was this what happened when one passed through the veils and communed with the spirits?

She lifted her eyes and looked at the expectant faces. Of course, she thought. To see the Artifact, to hear her speak, it was a thing to be spoken of among friends, wasn't it?

Those patterns are so unique. And her voice, and the chants—of course they all have their own charm. What a unique experience.

She closed her eyes and thought of the warm, dear faces of her clansisters and her clanbrothers. The gongs were beating, and the warriors were dancing down the path of the mountainside. They had come in from the kill, and they bore the heads of the invaders.

Look, sister, they said. *We have hunted well, this eve. See this head? How fragrant the locks of his hair are, and how shining and long. But he will look glorious standing guard at the doorposts of my home. Don't you think so, sister?*

The warrior grinned and passed before her, and the others passed as well, like waves washing over her, dancing down the mountainside bearing sheaves of rice from the harvest. Their feet sure on the steep slopes, the gongs beat a wild rhythm that made her want to dance and chant out loud of victory and challenge and the hunger to be free.

"Enough!" The roar tore apart her vision.

Around her, the veils shimmered and fell apart. The Compassionate attaché stood before her, his blue eyes blazing with fury, his body quivering.

"You show us an outrage," he said.

As if from a very great distance, she heard her reply.

"I show what the spirits say I must show. I speak in remembrance of what has gone before."

Her vision blurred. The room whirled around her, and before the darkness took her she heard Bayninan's voice calling her name and thought she saw a valiant warrior leaping over the heads of the entourage to gather her into his arms.

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"Hala."

When she was a child, her mother took her to the caves at Sagada. Time had wreaked its havoc on the caves, and the Compassionate had taken what was left of the mummies and the coffins and the bones and sealed them in huge airless capsules that were put on display in various realms where the Empire held sway.

There was very little left to see of what had once been, except for

holos and vids that played across the cave walls at intermittent intervals. Her mother had taken her deeper into the caves and, shining her light on the wall, she'd shown to Hala where generations of the Once-tribe had placed their marks in protest of the taking of what was theirs by right. There, alongside her mother, she'd placed her own mark too. She'd dipped her hands in the pale white matter, a gift of the spirits her mother told her, and laid the imprint of her palms on the walls right under her mother's own.

"By this the spirits will know you," her mother said.

She came awake with a gasp.

She was in a room with walls the shade of lemons.

"You're awake," a voice said.

She turned.

Bayninan sat beside her bed, worry etched on her face.

She blinked and memory came back to her.

"Oh no," she groaned. "I messed up. The attaché must be furious."

"It was rather chaotic for a while," Bayninan said. "And he was very angry, but I said you hadn't been feeling well and the implants were not doing their job—I told him it might be a virus."

"And he accepted that," Hala said.

Bayninan tilted her head to one side and smiled.

"I can be very good at persuading people when I want to," she said. "In the end, they were all very solicitous. The Consul from Siargao insisted that you be accommodated here."

Hala stared at Bayninan, wondering if her friend had always been this smooth-talking person with a twinkle in her eye.

"We're in the newest wing of the Suguran Foundation Center," Bayninan said with a smile.

"Oh no," Hala cried. "What have you done? We have to get out of here."

She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"No," Bayninan said. "You need to rest. Lie down. All will be well, Hala. You'll see."

She stared up at this strange Bayninan who exuded more authority than she'd ever had before.

"What do you mean, all will be well?" she asked. "Do you know what the Suguran Foundation does, Bayninan? Do you understand what they are?"

Of course, Bayninan couldn't know or understand, Hala realized. How could Bayninan know that it was the Foundation that was at the heart of the implants and the boosters? If the Foundation realized that her augmentations were failing, they would take them away without asking. She would lose everything—the archive of memory, the names of the clans, the faces, the songs, the dances, even the

memory of warm earth, the taste of steamed rice, and the scent of betelnut.

"Your augmentations are failing, Hala," Bayninan said. "I know the signs. They're like poison to you now, and if you don't get rid of them, you'll be dead before year's end."

"I can't," Hala said.

"It's no longer impossible," Bayninan replied. "There have been advancements, and the other augmented have been restored to their own selves without harm."

"I can't," Hala insisted. "Without these, I'm nothing, Bayninan. I won't be able to access the veils, I won't be able to perform. I'll be nothing."

"You'll never be nothing," Bayninan said. "You'll always be Hala to me—always as you were meant to be."

"You don't understand," Hala cried out.

"I do," Bayninan replied. "But you don't need to be afraid. There's no risk to your life."

"But there is," Hala shouted. "You're not an Artifact. You don't get to say what it is that I will lose or that I will gain. You're not the one people turn to when they need to remember the long line of history. You're not the one people come to when they want access to the wealth of our culture, our chants and our songs and our dances. You don't understand at all."

"And for whom do you keep those histories, Hala?" Bayninan asked. "For whom do you recite the poems and chants? For whom do you dance and for whom do you speak? You say you do these things in memory of the Munhawe and the mama-oh. But the Munhawe and the mama-oh served the Once-tribe, Hala. I do not see any of the Once-tribe among your audience. For what purpose do you risk your life, Hala? Is it for the Once-tribe or is it for yourself?"

Bayninan's words fell like a scourge on Hala's shoulders. She stiffened in indignation—was this how her friend saw her? Was it how people looked at her? Was she nothing more than an old woman who put her heritage on display?

"Get out," she said. "Get out of my sight, Bayninan. Get out before I forget that I love you and that you are my friend."

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Let us be clear on this. There was no invasion. With the signing of the treaty, the Once-country was brought into the folds of the Empire. It was an acknowledgment of the Compassionate's sovereignty and the god-given right to lead those who were left behind into the light of the Compassionate's greater wisdom.

Bayninan's departure left Hala with the luxury of solitude and time to think. It was very late in the evening—that much she knew. Silhouette's moon hovered in the night sky, and the chimes sang out the eleventh hour. Not so long ago, she had been standing before delegates from the allies of the Compassionate Empire. They had admired her, of that she was certain, they had listened to her. Perhaps her words had confused some of them, perhaps some of them had been titillated, perhaps some of them had been amused, and the Compassionate attaché had most certainly been moved to anger.

She recalled fragments of what she had spoken, and she wondered how she could have found the voice to sing the warrior's chant and the temerity to speak of the first invasion and the defeat of the Compassionate at the hands of the Once-tribe.

There was silence in her head now. None of the humming that accompanied her even when she was alone, none of the buzzing awareness that prickled at her skin even when in solitude. It was a strange feeling because no matter what, she'd always had the awareness of data streaming through her from the implants in her head.

Bayninan had spoken of some drug being applied to her system, and she supposed it was that which quieted the data and made her feel suddenly so alone.

As she contemplated the darkness, she wondered if this was what it would be like if she consented to have her augmentations removed. She would no longer be the Artifact, as Bayninan had said. But was it really that important to be the Artifact? To recite auguries and poetry, to dance the dances and to explain symbols that held no significance for those who viewed her only as a novel thing, to be whispered of by people who had no understanding of the rhythm of harvest and planting or the variations of the gong?

She closed her eyes in weariness. Tears seeped from beneath her eyelids and spilled down her cheeks as she acknowledged Bayninan's words.

Alone with her thoughts, Hala acknowledged those words' truth. She'd clung to her role, refusing to question it, but if she allowed herself to continue on as the Artifact, she would be betraying the blood that flowed in her veins.

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"It's not deadly," Ay-wan said. "But it is still a procedure that carries risk."

Ay-wan had come to her on the second day of her confinement and she had given him permission to relay her corrupted state to the representative.

Now, he was talking her through the procedure that would change her life forever.

"You mentioned no risk when we spoke of this in my home," Hala said. "And Bayninan said that removals had been successfully carried out on others who had been augmented."

A sliver of pain went through her. Bayninan had not been to see her since she'd sent her friend away. Instead, an emissary had come with the message that Bayninan was preparing for a return to the Once-country.

I will wait for word from you, Bayninan had written. *My promise still stands. If you send for me, I will come.*

What was Bayninan thinking? The Once-country was still in the grip of Chaos. Who would be there to greet them if they chose to return to the place of the Once-tribe? And why send a message when she could easily have come herself?

"You have lived with the augmentations for so long, lady," Ay-wan said. "Did you stop to consider that you were born of the blood? With the augmentations, you did not have to think of the consequences of your heritage. The machines suppressed what came naturally, and the visions you brought forth for the public were what the Compassionate desired of the program."

Hala frowned.

"What do you mean by that?"

Ay-wan shrugged. Something flickered in his eyes. It was lonely and sad, and for a moment Hala wished she had made the effort to know more about him instead of sealing herself away from any intimate connections.

"There is this possibility that you could come into the role you were meant to fill," Ay-wan said after a pause. "It is also possible that you will never be anything more now than what you were before the augmentations."

Hala bowed her head and stared at her hands. She thought of the exhilaration brought on by the dance. The moments of joy and the way she had lived towards those moments. Outside of the performances, she had simply been going through the motions—moving from one performance to the next like a doll or a machine waiting for its master to utter the word of command.

She raised her eyes and stared out the window. Fliers drifted above the dome outside; she'd seen them before and yet never really seen them. What else had she not seen while she was caught in the haze of her half-life as an Artifact, a person and yet not?

She thought of Bayninan looking at her with so much emotion and so much passion and wondered if her friend had also gone through the same process. She felt a pang at her own thoughtlessness. She'd never even bothered to wonder or to ask about Bayninan's life after their parting. What pain had Bayninan gone through, what suffering had she endured?

She bit her lip as she thought of their conversations. How spoiled she must have seemed. Now, as she contemplated the possibilities before her, she felt very small and unsure. Could she be brave enough to make her own way in the world as Bayninan had? Could she be strong enough to stand up and simply be Hala?

Beside her, Ay-wan cleared his throat.

She took a deep breath and turned to meet his gaze.

"I am ready," she said. "Whatever happens, I will embrace it."

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The Once-Artifact named Hala has been released from her duties. The Empire in its benevolence has bestowed on her the gift of life and the choice to remain on Silhouette as a citizen or to go wherever it is that she wishes.

In her farewell speech, the former Artifact graciously acknowledged the good work of the Compassionate and regretted that she could no longer continue in her capacity. In the attached visual clip it is clear that she has not yet fully recovered from the extraction of her augmentations. Silhouette will miss her spectacular performances. Most memorable are her final presentations before she opted for the operation that saved her life.

At the farewell ceremony, the Compassionate attaché announced the arrival of a new Artifact from the Once-place called Siargao. The new Artifact will be arriving on the jump ship named Carollus. Siargao representative Pero Nimata says that the Once-place has prepared a spectacle to greet the new Artifact's arrival. It will be something to look forward to.

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Note: This story has been two years in the making. JT Stewart planted the seed for it on the afternoon she came to visit while I was at Clarion West. I cried, she talked. Her words continue to inspire me.

“Légendaire.”

Kai Ashante Wilson

Having seen the reggaezzi perform, the righteous of Sea-john shake their heads in wonder. They will then murmur severally or as one, “*Légendaire.*”

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[Tonight]

The cavalcade forms up. In beats, without words, the drummers argue a bass line. While higher registers wait in silence, contraltos and bassos scat and moan, improvising the tune (the lyrics never change). The soulful melodies these deeper voices come up with are much too cool, and none capture the hot quiddity of their subject. “Make dat shit *bump*, y’all,” a counter-tenor exhorts. “Put some stank on it!” So the music picks up funk and swing. A girl bounces and stretches with the other dancers. They have black skin, or brown, or golden; hers is gray, waxen, and flyblown. What ails this girl, her bones slipping so weirdly in raddled tissues? It’s death: she died three days ago. But so long as weary flesh lasts she has the right to choose it over imperishable spirit. Thus her body can rise again, and dance tonight with living brethren. The boy she loved, dead years not days, reappears as another name among the beautiful lights, and plays *guitarra* with the same prodigy as before, when he lived. Dancers up front, players and singers trailing, they’ll process down Mevilla, the witches’ hill, and up and over the great breasts of the Mother, middle hill crowded with shanties of the poor, and onward to the furthest hill of Sea-john, Dolorosa, where rich families live in gardened houses and foreign powers keep grand embassies. A boy nicknamed *El Supremo* is about to join their host—he lies tossing in his bed, way over on that easternmost hill. No one will see this parade pass, few hear it. The performance is for that one boy alone, whom the reggaezzi will gather to their number at last, tonight.

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From the roof you can see the world. Downhill, north: the Kingdom is dark, except where yellow licks the darkness. Some torch or lamp burns here and there as far as the horizon. The southern view is the ocean, entirely dark save for two moons out at sea: one true, clear, and still in heaven's vault; another false, dappled, and shuddering on the vast black waters. The swelter lifts—a gust of seabreeze gives her goosebumps. But the filthy heat settles right back down. Some man is kissing her son under the archway of the house gate.

Is *this* how matters stand now, with tongue and teeth? In aid of asphyxiation, of cannibalism, more than love? All that biting! The moon's so bright, she feels implicated in the sloppy grapple below. Why does the boy let that man grab and handle him so? When she lies down with her husband or with her wife, the love's never harsh or ugly. Back when she and Jahs were as young and foolish as their son is today, even then, in the raw passion of first kisses, softness and respect were foremost. But now a caress and tenderness must be relics, not what youth want.

Night-bees flicker throughout the house garden. Below, the lime trees are all in flower, and green lights dim and kindle among the blossoms.

The boy utters little cries in his attacker's arms, though hardly in distress. Dance usually does so much better by professional bodies: thickening the thighs, making the back and arms formidable. It's just too bad *la dança* will whittle that rare body down, to all fine bones and no spare flesh. Her son—

"Ma'am?" Cook whispers from the stairwell to the roof. "Miss Savary? Duh baby just got in, safe. I wanted you to know. Dey out by the gate, him and his gentleman."

"Yes, Cook. Thank you." Savary sighs, and rolls the hulled berries from her skirts into the bowl. "Why don't you go on to your room now, dear, and rest? We can finish up in the morning."

"Yes, ma'am," Cook says. "Tank you, Miss." And the stairs groan back downwards.

The lover has remounted his horse. He wears the fine black robe of a nobleman from the Kingdom; but also the cornrowed hair of a soldier, and one who's seen action too, by those many bead-necklaces. He pats the hair of the boy clinging to his leg. (At last, a little tenderness!) They murmur intimacies Savary cannot make out from the roof, in accents of the language she forsook for this one spoken in the hills.

The lover rides away and the boy comes up the moonlit garden toward the house. Stumbling dreamily, still he cuts no figure but a dancer's. Savary gets up, holding the bowl. The sons of other mothers

are fumbling at first love, safely, with local boys and girls. Hers is *virtuoso* of the best troupe in Sea-john, and snaps brusque fingers at musicians twice his age during performance. He's off giving shows, most nights, at some palace in the Kingdom. Savary makes her way downstairs into the candlelit interior.

Her wife and husband have long since gone to bed. They made their peace years ago in the household war; they came to terms. Not Savary! The young will post headlong down perilous roads, dreaming they're on the way to adventure, en route to love: *someone* must tell them, No, wait, you've turned wrong. Nothing lies down that way but heartbreak and disaster. Jahs says, But, my love, his new friends are those same *fils-de-roi* who buy a yacht from me. That boat, Savary —a whim of theirs!—keeps our family well for a year. If the boy runs away, he can go to the shelter of some palace. What can we offer a virtuoso? His family's love, just our love, and a room in the house where he was born. Better not to fuss and fight, better to keep the boy near us, surely?

Well, yes, Savary agrees. But….

A son too talented and too headstrong isn't a problem of temporal power, upon which her immortal husband could, perhaps, work an easy miracle. Rather it's a problem of the sort all souls suffer passing through the vale of tears, before which Redamas is as helpless as any mortal. Still, Savary pleads to him: But, *you*, Redy—can't you *do* something?

I'm just a god, Redamas says, not God.

Savary stows the berries in the cold cellar at the back of the pantry. By now, the boy is in the kitchen too, reaching down a cup from the shelves of fancy-glass. He looks over the table's vast clutter, and underneath, searching for the palm wine jar. Which is right beside Savary in the pantry; she picks it up.

There's almost nothing of his father in him, so much of her: brown and tender of skin too, and with his shirt gaping open beau-boy-style she sees a red-violet narrative of hands and teeth scrawled across his neck and torso. Not for the first time Savary thinks, *my* little boy's the one they're calling "El Supremo?" If only he were strapping like his sister, six-foot something. If only his papa's divinity had come down to him too—no worries then! Somewhere abroad, his sister's hunting a beast with the fell name *Assassin of Cities*. But Maman has no worries there. You have only to see the god whom you birthed smack aside thunderbolts, rout dragons, to thereafter save the worrying for your mortal child.

He looks his age: the baby softness long gone, no mannish thickening yet. Sixteen.

"Weren't you supposed to give a show for some big muckety-muck tomorrow?" Savary steps from the pantry shadows, into the candle-

bright kitchen. “Since when can you dance, all eaten up like that, in front of the Kingdom’s uptight nobility?” She gestures at the lewd bounty of his bruises.

“Oh, Maman!” The boy jumps and squeaks, a charming flutter. “You *scared* me.” He comes to hug her and Savary’s own arm takes him in tenderly, at once. How else? He smells of costly soap, sandalwood and rose attar; a light odor of horses, also expensive. He kisses her cheek and they part. Quick as crime, his hands do up his shirt laces, hiding the bulk of purple evidence. “Of course I’ll be in a robe and mask, Maman! We’re performing devotions to the Saints out-of-doors. Nothing hootchie *en chambre*.”

She offers; he takes the jar.

Savary follows him to the table where the cup waits—her eyes on the lovebites above his collar. It’s just too much! “But *why* would you want some awful man from over there? And worse, a *kingson*!”

“Oh, Maeqal’s not royal issue, Maman.” Complicated jewelry, some new thing, hangs about his neck. One chain, fingerthick, entwined by others, hairsbreadth fine. *Not* silver: the metal glints whiter and more matte.

“No?” Savary frowns. “I thought he was one of the Old Man’s half-thousand.”

The boy hums a negative. “And the King only ever had 114 sons, really. A good third of *those*”—speaking lightly, he jiggles loose the jar’s stopper —“were lost to the wars and fratricides. Maeqal’s neither son nor grandson. Exceedingly wonderful to me, of course: but he’s nobody up at Court.”

His eloquent hands, this temperate tone, the sheer *mildness* of him make it difficult for Savary to recall the conflict, to retain it. You can almost see how one small boy comes and goes in safety among absolute powers.

“Well, anyway,” Savary says, feeling obscurely finessed. “I thought we’d agreed on an early evening, just this once.” She strokes a hand across the blades of his back. “I thought you *weren’t* going over to the Kingdom tonight.” His shirt’s such fine stuff—light as linen, soft as silk.

“Oh….” He looks, surprised, over his shoulder. “I didn’t! The troupe only ran through a couple new songs, then we did the early show at Blue Moon. A short set. It was fun, just playing around for once, goofing off.” Nowadays the boy’s too brazen to bother about lying. He’ll commit his mischief upfront, and make nice apologies afterwards, as necessary. Even so, a staggering sum of hours remains unaccounted for, in this version of events. Late afternoon, all the evening, very deep into night; rose will tint the skies, soon enough.

Savary’s temper frays again. “Then how is it you’re falling up in here so long after midnight bells?”

He grins. To some less happily married woman, it would doubtless seem a smile of general joy, not specifically fucked-out bliss. “Maeqal showed up at the Blue Moon for the show,” the boy says. “And we… chilled for a while, afterwards.”

Savary’s not ready for such a smile on the face of her younger child, the baby. Bitterly she says, “Just how old is that kingson of yours, anyway?”

The boy grimaces. “Oh, Maman—Cook’s let the palm wine go *again*. You really ought to speak with him. This is almost vinegar!”

“Boy, I asked you a question.”

He gives her his full attention. “First cousin of the Royal Blood, Thrice-removed, Twice-returned on the Matrilineal Line, His Excellency, Maeqal son of Oaqim lacks something for thirty, I believe.” His left hand signs “approximately” while the right tips fancy-glass to his lips. “Twenty-eight years old?” The boy makes another face. “Twenty-nine? You’ll remember they count birthdays differently in the Kingdom, but one year more or less, I always forget.”

A year less. Savary stops herself from saying so, because of course he already knows. This is just more of that bafflement—decorative, feigned—lately adorning his speech.

She tries some rhetoric of her own. “Oh, the Saints must weep for his poor lady wife! What can she be thinking, I wonder, with her man creeping over here to Sea-john all the time, spending late-nights with scrumptious young *virtuosi*?” With a start, Savary realizes they’ve switched to the language of the Kingdom. After all this time, it trips off her son’s tongue with an ease surpassing her own, and she was *born* there, he up here, in the hills.

“Aréienne hasn’t danced in two years. She’s writing a song-cycle, her knees hurt, and very soon now she’ll have her baby. And La Pablo fell in love, and sailed away with the ambassador from Kidan. So if Maeqal wants a virtuoso, he must come to me. And scrumptious, Maman? Thank you! There’s no lady wife as yet, either. I wouldn’t have a married man. But you, Maeqal’s father, and all his clan patricians, are remarkably in accord—that noblemen his age should be married, that his run of freedom is getting long and needs to end. Before they muttered, but now his family is shouting: *exile, disinheritance, excommunication,* they say, if Maeqal fails to marry before the next Long Rains.”

“There! You see?” Savary cries. “*That’s* what they do over in the Kingdom. Up here, we Johnnys love who we want. Can’t you see what comes of messing around with some kingson?”

“Kingcousin only, Maman. A minor one.” He’s blasé, or just tired, but anyway deflects her every word with suave hands and chatter. “Now his children, *they* will be born ‘Full First,’ if Maeqal’s mother

can fix a wife for him out of the daughters of the Royal Concubinage." He sips, making faces.

Johnnys treat one another tenderly. But over in the Kingdom you went for blood in any conflict—more so with the ones you loved. After all this time in Sea-john, Savary still cannot pull her blows enough. "So will you be marrying him too, then?" She sneers. "You and this king's-daughter?"

One day, maddened by remorse, she will rant at her wife, describing how the boy looks at her now, and Jahs will say, "No, my love, no. He wouldn't want that…" but Savary never does forgive herself for the hurt she causes, his look of betrayal.

"If anyone, Maman, I thought *you*…." The boy stops. He begins again, without tremolo. "Can we not try to be kind to each other? You know perfectly well they marry one man, one woman, in the Kingdom."

She wants to make her son *see,* to choose more *wisely*; not to hurt him. In a rush, Savary says, "Whatever happened to that wonderful Johnny boy you used to run around with? The carpenter from the boatyard? Oh, you two were *lovely* together! Kéké was his name, I think. Why not—"

She cuts herself off. For it seems her big mouth has hit on some name that had better been left unspoken. Her son's face wrings with such suffering as who could want for her own child, and Savary's at a loss to respond because she's one of those who have only ever won in love, gained and gained, and never lost. She says, "Oh, sweetheart," and repeats that as she strokes circles on his back.

"I can't *talk*—" His voice clots with emotion. "—about Kéké. I really wish you wouldn't, Maman, please." He sets his cup on the table, and briskly recovers nonchalance—or its semblance. "Tomorrow's a big day for us, and I'm very tired. It's our first show for the Queen Mother herself, at the Royal Pavilion." On his face, Savary sees resolve, finality. "So, if you'll excuse me?" Not actually waiting on any sign from her, the boy gently brushes by to take the stairs to his room.

Savary watches him up. She suffers a strange, fey moment: catching a glimpse of the here-and-now as it shall one day be in memory, most details worn away, but a few deeply etched, suffused with the poignancy that accrues to long years of regret. A lifetime's worth. *Remember? He wore his shirt a la beaux boys. And the diamonds in his ears!—big as your thumbnail.* The presentiment of loss goes swiftly as it came. The noisy old wood lies quiet under his feet: something in just where or how he knows to step. The little truant used to escape just so on nights past, out to forbidden busking on the waterfront.

Savary very nearly rushes upstairs to plead with him. *We love you.*

Stay. But, no…he'll sleep here, and they can talk later in the morning. That's soon enough. She pinches dark the bank of candles, then goes to join her wife and man.

φ

[So many nights]

Oh yeah. You all best watch out for that one there.

What mess you talking, old woman?

No, no, old mother. This here is the *sweetest* boy.

Yeah! He never give no trouble. Mind his maman real nice.

Keep your eye out is what I'm saying. Oh, all you are just stupid. *Look* at him. See? See there? The boy, so young, dancing like that! What age he got, three years? Not four yet, no. The reggaezzi coming forth to take this one away, sure 'nough. Sooner or later, wait and see.

Reggaezzi! Why even *speak* such?

Take *back* dat cuss, old witch!

Don't you know this boy belong to Savary and Jahs? That the papa of him is the dark god from across-bayou, so tall, so black, so strong? Family live nice and proper on Dolorosa. You *don't* want to be cursing *this* boy!

It's no curse of mine, you idiots. A hand lay on him already, when he was born and the Song filled his heart—

Hurry, go and get Jahs. Run, quick inside. Tell her a *witch* come for her pickney!

Jahs Jahs Jahs! A witch in the yard! Come forth to snatch the baby!

Oh, come quick, Jahs! *Hurry.*

φ

Among the workers of the boatyard were a very old man and his daughter, who was only old. One or the other of them sometimes made lunch and siesta stretch a long long time playing the drums. *Those* were the best days! He wriggled and squirmed until Jahs set him down, or he'd yank and beg until she said, Well, go on then, letting him loose from her skirts to run out into the front yard and dance with the workers. Jahs always ate her lunch standing up, never lay out for a nap under the bearded cypress, and she rarely could be coaxed away to dance even for just a little while. But she would let him go.

He liked the old daughter on drums just fine. She had brilliant technique and played hot exciting rhythms that hit the *mas despacio*

with perfect timing to keep a dancer going fast, yet always able to catch breath too. He *loved* the old man's touch! Deep sly tricks complicated the playing. Those beats evolved on the subtlest schedule, and no mind could anticipate them. To catch the old man's riddims needed utter surrender to hips and feet and shoulders such that time and the world became sublime irrelevancies, and the only thing real was the rapturous pulse of the body thoughtless, just feeling, pure motion. The old man was very very old, though, and mustn't be bothered, let him nap, boy; he's earned a little rest, hasn't he? Today, for once, the old man played.

φ

Such a fearsome racket! Why all you in an uproar out here? What is going on?

Jahs, dis old woman right here, dis one. She said reggaezzi coming for yo little boy.

Yes. She said it would please her very well if they carried off your son to Mevilla right now, today, to live with witches and demons and flowers forever.

I heard her too. I heard everyting. Dat's exactly what she said.

But, old mother, why would you say such a thing? The *reggaezzi!* Baby, come here now; that's enough dancing. Come to Maman. Don't you hear me calling? Come, boy. *Come!*

Fíjese. You see, Senyora Jahs? The boy is lost to the Song. He's faraway where you cannot touch him. The place where reggaezzi go. You cut his hair nice and neat—it is not shaggy and long. You feed him; the boy is pretty and fat—not thin from always eating smoke. He looks like people, like us—not covered all over in green lights. But he is one of them already, almost. Um reggaezzo.

Stop your playing, old man! Are you stupid? A witch in the yard, reggaezzi, and my son—and you there are playing just like nothing. Stop I say! *Stop!*

Ah, but you see? The drummer stops and it makes no difference. Still the boy dances! How does he hear, how can he know? Where does the Song come from?

Please, *cariño*. Maman has you now. It's all right; wake up. Please wake up.

φ

[Many nights]

Just before the Long Rains fall, some nights blow so cold no one

dreams of going out without a poncho, but other nights the sea doesn't breathe at all, and the heat is like standing before the oven open at full fire. This night is one of those latter, so nobody wants much dinner. Before going to bed, Cook sets out only a bowl of leaves, a plate of fruit. Batalha crosses her arms and lays her head on the table, after just two bites from her mango. The grownfolk hardly eat, they drink palm wine, and Savary and Redamas and Jahs begin to laugh. Savary complains, I'm just getting *too* stringy and tough, going up and down these hills. Soon there will nothing tender and soft on me, and my loves won't want me anymore. Papa says, Oh girl, please: you know you fat. But she jumps up from the table and lifts her thin cotton skirt a little, moving her foot, so the muscle jumps and bulges in her calf: There—you see? Ma Jahs leans far over and slaps Ma Savary on the bottom. Girl, you don't see all that jiggle? That's jelly! They laugh, and me too. Savary says, You know, it's so blazing hot tonight we ought to take up some long pillows and sleep on the roof. So that's what we do.

Redamas carries up Batalha and lays her on a long pillow. Jahs whispers in Savary's ear and makes her happy. She giggles. Nearby in the flower court of the Tswani embassy, the circle tonight is drumming some very strange rhythms, from a country I don't know the name of. The beats make a big sound, *powerful*, they want nothing to do with fine dancing, they want jumps, cartwheels, flips—Boy! Savary shouts. How many times I *told* you! Do *not* be doing that tumbling on this roof! Come away from the edge there. *Back away* I say!

And so then it is only the fine dancing I can do after all, not the steps the drumming really calls for. Jahs wants to know why, lately, Batalha is so tired all the time that she falls asleep this early, when before you could hardly make her go to bed before the dawn comes. Savary and Redamas, they look at each other, and Papa says Batalha no longer is content to learn only the knife, that she wants more than to come every full and new moon to militia practice. What she wants is for Redamas to train her, too, with the six full-timers paid out the Johnny-fund. So everyday Batalha doesn't go anymore to help manage the orphanage with Savary, but instead comes to train with Redamas and the soldiers: spear, archery, open hand, a hard run up the steepest slope of the Mother, and now they've just got some horses too, so….

"But the girl is only eleven years old!" Jahs says.

"Well, you can talk to her, then." Savary throws up her hands. "But, me, I am *all done* arguing with Batalha. Anyway, she's not like the baby there. This one is her *Papa's* daughter—a giant like you, Redy. Bigger than some of those men-soldiers already. So I don't see

what harm it can do. Batalha was sending me *mad* with all that energy of hers; now she just sleeps. I say it's good for her."

Inside the air didn't move, but up here, every now and then a breeze stirs off the ocean far downhill. Even so, the night is close and hot for so much dancing. I go back to where they are sitting and pour three thirsty cups of water from the jar. Redamas touches my head.

"Little man, you are all flat on one side. Didn't Nurse pick out your hair this morning?"

"Oh, that one danced his heart away at lunchtime today!" Jahs says. "He danced so much, so hard, he fell asleep under the beards of the cypress and just slept the whole afternoon through. That's why his hair is ruint. We were loud loud loud, quartersawing the good mahogany into planks. But even that noise couldn't wake him."

Savary snuggles and whispers; Jahs calls to Redamas.

"Watch out, my baby doesn't go dancing over the edge of this roof. *Exca senyora éeu vamos abajo um ratinho*."

Redamas says, "*Um ratao, mas bien*," and grins and winks at Jahs. Savary laughs out loud. He reaches and she reaches back to take his hand; their fingers squeeze, then let loose. Mamans go downstairs to the big bedroom to be alone together. Jahs never goes to be alone with Redamas, and Savary goes much more with Jahs than she does with Redamas.

"Papa?" I feel I shouldn't ask, but I *must* know. "Would it make you sad if Ma Savary and Ma Jahs loved you only half as much as they love each other?"

"Oh, *no*. It would make me very happy. Half as much is a lot!" Redamas laughs. "You don't understand, my son—*everything* here makes me happy. More than anything I wanted to have family. A daughter, a son: so it makes me feel up to the very top of happiness that two women chose me. I was just the loneliest across-bayou, you can't even imagine. Do you know how lonely the gods are? We are so lonely, there are so few of us, that *ghosts* are our teachers. *Ghosts* are our friends. We…open a box, and *ghosts* come out to tell us the things we need to know. Where are the people? *Where* are they? Only ghosts!"

"DI. Discorporate Intelligences."

Redamas smiles. "Yes, DIs, like you said. I shouldn't call them ghosts. We know better, you and me."

"Why are you laughing, Papa?"

"Your Johnny accent, it's very funny. I really should speak more to you in the language of the gods. But it's so sweet, it's funny, the way you say that."

"Do a trick for me now, Papa. I like it when you do magic."

"What should I do?" Redamas lifts a hand, all conjure and flourish.

“Maybe I will make you go to sleep.”

“No, don’t! I hate that one. Don’t make me sleep, Papa!”

“Are you sure?” Redamas twinkles his fingers. “My DI always said it’s my very best trick.”

“No. I *hate* it. Please!” I grab his hand tight and hold his fingers still. “Do another. Something else!”

“All right, all right.” Redamas shakes his hand free; he smiles. “How about this?” As glowing coals in a fire are steeped with richer color than the fire itself, so, pale as moonlight, a shine appears in the air around Papa’s head, and where his naps grow, not black but indigo-color, round the edges of his hairline, the widow’s peak, sideburns, and kitchen: every curly strand fills with brilliance, the way hot coals do, but this light makes no heat, and it shimmers, blue as the sky at noon.

“More! Brighter! Like a strike of lightning. The way you did that other time!”

“Oh, I can’t, little man. Not tonight. All day long it was so cloudy, I hardly got a taste of sun.”

Because he’s sitting I can stand there and pat his hair while the blue light dims between my fingers and goes dark. When it’s gone, I ask another question.

“Now I want to know something important. Batalha has blue in her hair—”

“Your Papa *never* dreamed he’d burden any son or daughter with divinity, little man. But you are every bit as much my child as Batalha. Now I *explained* this to you: Ma Savary has a little divine inheritance, as it turns out. That’s why, with her recessive allele, only daughters and not sons…”

“Yes, yes, Papa. I know, I know. You said before. The thing I want to know is, when my hair is all white as sand, my face wrinkled-up like dry fruit, and I need two canes, one for my right hand, one for my left: will *you,* Papa—you and Batalha—still have all your strength and all your youth? Is that true?”

“Who said those words? *Who?* Where did you hear such things?”

“Kéké at the boatyard. He said when I am many many years drifting in the sea, just some old bones eaten up by fishes, even then you will be as young and fresh as you are today.”

“Well…we are all here now, little man. Ma Jahs, Ma Savary, Batalha, you, and me. The night is good. Why should we worry so much about tomorrow? You are very young; we have a long, long time.”

“But is it true, Papa?”

“You mustn’t worry about such things. That Kéké is not a very nice boy. I’m going to go down to the boatyard and have a talk with him

tomorrow."

"Oh, don't, Papa! Kéké is very handsome."

"But, little man, that's not a good reason to let him say mean things to you."

"I don't mind, though. It's all right, really. Don't come down to the boatyard and scare him, Papa. Please!"

"Because you say so, I won't make him scared. But I must go and say something to him, I must. I just don't like what he said at all. Pass your Papa the palm wine jar there, will you?"

φ

[Nights yet]

"Batalha! That short Johnny, the one who trains you *miliciales* with the spear, I heard him tell Papa you're the best *by far* of the bunch. And Papa said to him, 'Yes, but you must never say so to Batalha; her head's that big already.' Papa said the gods once all had such, such 'mesomorphy and kinesthesia' as you. He said that you're a—what did he say?—'throwback sport' to those days before the gods intermarried so much. When Batalha grows up some, Papa said, and comes into her—he called it 'perjuvenescence,' then she will be a match even for the paladin of the Godspear."

Batalha smiled down at him, and all her teeth showed. As if against a monster, she brandished some imaginary weapon—nor could the paladin himself, with his spear all ablaze with sun-stuff, have outmatched her gallantry. Batalha said, "You heard him? *Papa* said that?"

"Yes. But then Papa said, oh, you're a grief to him, and 'Among all hardheaded daughters of the world, chief of them, because my Batalha just will not practice her psionics properly.' Papa said you could be a great adept if only—"

"Chaw!" Batalha sucked her teeth, dismissing the rest with a turned-up palm. "*I do not care* about any damned psionics. Nothing in this world is more boring than sitting all day long, numb-assed, trying to think no thoughts at all. *One-pointed concentration!* O my brother, I sure hope you feel lucky, that Papa never bothers you about magic and stupidness!"

In fact, the least whiff of fatherly impatience or motherly frustration wafting his way tended to suffocate him like smoke, to choke off his capacity for disobedience or even dissent, until his own desires clogged in his throat, voiceless and caught. Batalha, though, argued for what she wanted. They could say, No, You mustn't, You're

too young, and all of it was like nothing to Batalha—silliness, easily crushed with one hand. Her fierce words slapped parental "Nos" out of the air like gnats. Only *train* with the full-time miliciales? Ha! Batalha wanted to *be* a Johnny soldier! *Her* spear, *her* sash, *her* cuirass. And who of them rode better? Not even Papa! Yes, the big mean stallion: *that* one should be hers! Batalha had only to set her sights, and soon she would be getting her way.

Now she wanted to drink the wine of Sea-john's nights, and no little cup for her, and no watering, either. Just like the other miliciales she could walk the waterfront late late late through the drunken crush, in blackest night, and kick the ass of any bully hassling the sugar girls and beaux boys. Oh, he worshipped his sister; *of course* he did! Who, so young, was more mighty, had more swagger? Pick anyone from the whole wide world: there *was* no one else, only Batalha! So much the warrior was she that her old name fell away for this *nom de guerre*.

"I don't care, let them!"

"But my brother, you—"

"Stick a knife into somebody with blood and soul and dreams inside? No, Batalha! I will never never never do that. Some Maman loved them, some Papa picked them up and put them on his shoulders. So let them, whoever they are, go on living. I will die instead."

"But don't you understand the *horrible things* pirates do when they come to Sea-john? They are bad people, brother. No people are worse!"

"It makes no difference how bad they are, Batalha. They are just *people* to me. I couldn't hurt them."

"You are clever, *ermano mio*, and clever people won't do something that seems wrong if they cannot understand why they must. So come. Come, sit down with me here. I will explain why Johnny mamans-and-papas want their boys and girls to learn the knife.

"It's because the laws and taxes of the Kingdom don't hold over here in Sea-john. It's because we Johnnys are free—*Jaúnedi mar libre*! —and so we Johnnys are on our own. No armies of the Kingdom, no garrison at the citadel: *nobody* will ever lift a finger to help Sea-john. When the pirates raid us from the Gulf, when they loot and rape and murder and burn, what are the people doing over in the Kingdom? They're yawning. They turn over. They go back to sleep. *Ruff yoof* come over here from the Kingdom, and what for? To beat up Johnnys. In every corner of the world, the people know us because we are so beautiful, because our music is the best, because *quí e festa*. They all want to come for a visit. And half the time, it's true, those roadboys who guard caravans, saltdogs who guard ships, and soldiers

from the Kingdom, come just for a good time, to have some fun. But then a penny drops: they turn into villains. They turn cruel and strange. I see them forcing kisses, grabbing breasts and ass, so you would think any pretty Johnny belonged to them.

"So you see, brother? That's why you must learn the knife. All of us in the hills should carry one. Too many don't. It's such a good thing for you to know, ermano mio, so very good. I wish you would consider."

For love of her, he did consider, and thought again: No.

But they *forced* him to learn to hold the knife, *made* him know where to stick it should pirates come again to Sea-john, should he get snatched up in the rape-and-loot. Papa took his hand and pulled him along to many tedious practices, where you must draw and stab and slash in the same way, over and over. They could *make* him do these things, but they *couldn't* make him remember to carry the knife. Where is your knife? Redamas would shout. Listen to me, boy, *listen*. When the pirates come, they come *all of a sudden.* There will *never* be time to…. Savary would shout: Go *right back* to the house and get it now! Every time I see you without your knife, Jahs would shout, I will *always always always* send you back again until you….

With mamans-and-papas, things must always end in tears, there could only be sobbing. Batalha would look down at his belt where the sheathe was meant to hang, and raise her eyebrow. It made him smile in a guilty way, sick in his belly. But then his sister would only cluck her tongue, shake her head, and let the matter drop. Somehow the fiercest Johnny of Sea-john was the only one who understood him, the softest.

Such a night in the house, sometimes, because of the boatyard, mad hours finishing a yacht for some *fils-de-roi*, or because of the orphanage, ten *abandonini* all come down with stomachache, fifteen boys and girls with grippe, or because of a fire in the hills, or for some bad ruckus on the waterfront, and Papa mustering the militia out. These moments, *quick*, ask whether you could go out nightwalking with Batalha, and more than likely some harried adult hand would wave you off: yes yes yes, boy, but you listen to your sister. On other nights Ma and Ma always said, Papa would say, your sister is thirteen and big and wears her knife, you are small and seven and won't wear yours. No, you *cannot* go roaming in those rough nights on the waterfront, down under the Mother. Stay round here on Dolorosa.

Take my hand. The way down is dark here.

A slender moon, hardly giving them a candle's light; it was the last moon: waning crescent before the new. Stars and planets, and the white parallels of waves breaking over the reefs, distinguished the

blackness of sky from sea. *So much* going on over at the bottom of the Mother. Such lights, such crowds and music on the waterfront!

"I *know* the way here, Batalha! They let me go round on Dolorosa!"

"How many brothers do I have? Just one, only *you!* So if you won't mind me, I'm taking you right back to the house. I must keep you safe."

He took her hand.

On the waterfront were people too poor for soap, who washed only with water, stinky of armpit, ass. Caramel spirits and pineapple juice. The day's catch grilled over the driftwood yield of shipwrecks. "Got that sweet fish, right here! Salt' with sailors' tears!"

Everybody not foreign was sugar or beau. Battle scars, sailors in breeches, and those black robes they wore in the Kingdom were mainstays. Johnny men glory-burned, Johnny women with art scars, some just boys and girls, metal hoops piercing their bodies and glinting, not so much older than himself on second look. Men and women of Sea-john dressed the same, in shirts and wraparounds, but here the shirts gapped from neck to navel, showing the soft swells of bosom and belly, smooth panes of chest and youthful abdomen. No need to guess, it showed plain: her waist so small and hips so wide, whose ass was big, some handsome man's excitement. All these wraparounds were just that short and tight. Up and down the cobbles of the Board, out on the beach, down the docks, and all around the many fires, drummers and guitarristas and the world's loveliest people dancing.

"When I'm big, I'm going to come down here *every single night* and dance. I'll be a beau boy and strangers will give me money!"

"No, brother—not that! The best dancers, don't you know they go into one of the top jukes and dance there? Sugarcane, Blue Moon, or the Tropica? Up front of everybody, and the crowd loves them so much that guards must keep them safe? And for the *very* best dancers? Some herald will come over from the Kingdom, all in silk and dripping jewels, to beg the virtuosi out of Sea-john, beg them to come over and dance in the Kingdom. Those dancers make shows for the Court, all the *fils-de-roi* and great ambassadors, the tycoons and courtesans. Johnnys stay up there at Court, sometimes, and take a lover, settling down rich. It's true some boys and girls in the jukes sling booty; but others just dance. So a juke's much better, you see. Ma Jahs knows everybody. Talk to her. She will know somebody to get you into the troupe at a juke."

"Oh. Why didn't I know these things? About jukes? About the Court?"

"You are young. Why should you know? I didn't know myself at seven. Ask Ma Jahs to take you around the top jukes so you can see

them all dance, then pick a troupe you like. The dancers in the jukes are very very good, *ermano mio*. Oh, they can dance! But many of the bailarines are not as good as you."

"I will do it, Batalha. Just like you said! That sounds *twice as good* as beaux boying here on the waterfront. All I want is to be in a juke and go to Court!"

"Better that way, yes. Then you can dance all you like, they pay you for it, and you don't have to fuck some strange dude every night.

"I'm hungry, do you want one of these too?"

"Yes."

"Put two on for us," Batalha said to the man squatting by his grill. She got coins of her own nowadays from Ma Savary, and so had one to give the Johnny fisherman. He ducked out shrimp from his bucket, stabbed them onto a sharp stick, and lay the skewers over golden coals. Turning them once, plucking them up: he dipped them through the bowl of lemony pepper, and passed the skewers to Batalha.

Angry thunder broke over the surf of merry noise. Harshly shouting, some Kingdom man, not far away, wanted to know how all this *nasty Johnny sugar* thought it could just *wave up under* a man's nose and then get *snatched away*. He wasn't having it—*No*!—so just bring that *fat tricky* ass here. Against the hard threats, there rose sweet screams of a pretty boy hindered from flight.

Batalha, already as tall as Papa, had a clear view over the heads of the crowd, to some sight that lit her up with rage. Her hair electrified, blue-white, in a momentary flash. "Fucking *roadboys*!" she said, handing the skewers to him. "Hold mine, brother, and stay right here. Stay *put.* I'll be back in no time."

Batalha thrust through the crowd and vanished. Someone thin, all musk and funk and black as Papa almost, passed by with a guitarra; and someone else too, more naked, with long, locked hair and skin no darker than palms and soles, like browning butter. Both young bodies tattooed, somehow, in phosphorescence.

Reggaezzi. He'd never seen any before, hardly heard of them. But he knew at once. A boy and a girl. The boy one sat in the sand and tuned his guitarra. The girl one touched her toes, no, she was laying her hands flat to the packed sand and going up in handstand, falling over in bridge, and coming up to stand again. One leg she lifted obtuse the standing, grasped that ankle, and brought up the shin to kiss. In the murk of night, the glowing curlicues on their skin pulsed marine green—*not* tattoos after all, but something—alive? Bright mites, infinitesimal, crept over their skin, either down in it, shining through, or glittering on top in some vexed way impossible to figure out.

"Oh, they're young!" he said. "They don't look much older than my

sister."

Some Johnny in the crowd forming up answered back, "How you don't know, boy? Reggaezzi all die soon. Hardly none make twenty."

Dressed badly for the brisk waterfront, they wore only shirts and loincloths. The reggaezza had torn off the sleeves of her shirt, and he knew why in the same way no one had ever taught him to breathe: so the line of her beautiful arms showed better.

The boy one began to play.

Strumming in rasjeo so fast and rich that a second player seemed to harmonize with him, even at times a third; and though there was none, a drummer seemed to keep the beat: the reggaezzo struck and tapped the guitarra's inlay of clapwood while he played. He sang too.

The hoarse falsetto lacked the glories of his *guitarrismo*, but that voice was still a marvel of feeling. The song, in the language of the gods, was hard to follow. A mother, no, a great grandmother, had a new baby at her breast. This baby so precious so beautiful but sick and fragile with—time and space? The baby somehow growing older than the mother herself, a great grandmother to her own mother, the world upside down, reversed. *What on earth?* The lyrics fit together so strangely he couldn't make sense of them. But the song was loving as a lullaby and yet *triste*, a lament. The reggaezza danced.

Oh, she danced.

Oh!

He'd never thought to dance in such a way that a story was told, the lyrics incarnated in a sorrowful play-act that nevertheless rendered respect to every beat and evolution of the music. He could grasp the mothersong better, in heart if not mind, seeing the reggaezza's dance. A small gathering hereabouts was silent, while further off the night disported in revelry and strife. He stood dumb, mouth hanging open, and watched with his whole self. Nothing lasts, and the best must be briefest: so too with this. When the performance ended, the gathering of Johnnys murmured the same word of appreciation. Never more in agreement, he softly chimed in too. For a moment more palm fronds rustled overhead, and breakers rolled, the gulls calling. Then the quiet smaller crowd spoke, laughed, and began dispersing into the greater. The reggaezza, thirsty, plucked a jar of *Sea-john free* right out of the hands of some passerby. Rude!—but the passing Johnny made neither mention nor moan.

The boy one walked up and pointed, saying, "Gimme dat."

He passed over one of the skewers. The reggaezzo put half the length, three shrimp, into his mouth and drew the stick forth clean, crunching and chewing hungrily. The reggaezzo stank of old sweat and something herbal. He was as crushingly beautiful as Kéké, almost. Green constellations crept across the black sky of him. The

reggaezzo spat some shelly wreckage and gobbled the other three shrimp.

"Dat one too!"

"I'm very sorry; I can't. It's my sister's, not mine. Batalha asked me to hold it for her."

"Aw, ain't you just too posh?" The reggaezzo turned and called the girl. "Hey! Quick, come listen at dis idjit here. Sound *straight off* Dolorosa, dis one!"

The reggaezza came over, thin as a finger and yet strong. Hunger had melted all fat from her, the daily hours of dance showing in the ripple of her thighs and veiny strength of arm.

"Now just tell *huh* what you come dare said to me!"

"Only that I must hold these shrimp for my sister—"

The reggaezza threw back her head, whooping laughter. She said to him, "Little prince-boy, don't you know we could lay duh *worse cuss* on any Johnny won't give food, won't give clothes, or turn away help from us reggaezzi? So you not Johnny den, *ti prince*?"

"I *am* Johnny." His lips trembled, eyes close to tears, for there was great hot power in her, like the burning sureties of Batalha, like the bright god in Papa.

"Zas!" said the reggaezza, snapping her fingers. "I could go like *dat* and yo Mamans fall out duh fishing boat tomorrow and shark eat dem up screaming. Zas! and yo Papas slip from high cutting coconut, crack dere heads wide-open so dey drooling stupid forever! Or maybe you hate yo Mamans and yo Papas, and you love yo ownself much better? Den zas!, *ti prince*, and *you—"*

"Here! I didn't know. They never want to tell me anything about reggaezzi. Please, won't you take it now? I love them and Batalha best, but don't curse them. Curse me."

"See? You just too mean sometime. Duh little boy didn't even know. Now you got him crying and I feel all bad. Johnny boy, you could keep dat fuh y'sistah. Salright, salright—don't cry. Nobody ain't cussing nobody tonight."

"I thought duh boy was talking back smart. You know I can't stand dat. Some posh asshole. Anyway it's two whole days and no Ladder-to-Heaven. I need some smoke *bad*. I hate dis hunger. I hate how cold duh night feel. *Gimme dat*—I'll eat it!"

He handed over the skewer and the reggaezza crouched down on her haunches, making the same short work of six big shrimp as the boy had. He lifted off his poncho and tucked it warmly round the girl's shoulders, just as though the reggaezza were in creaky old age, not the veriest youth. The boy one squatted down beside and stroked her long matted hair; he said, "Couple more days, duh leaves be all brown and good, and we climb right back up duh Ladder-to-Heaven.

I hate deese days too, but gotta eat *some* time, don't we?"

She looked at the reggaezzo. "You don't hear dat? You don't hear *Song*?"

"No. Where?—Yeah! But where it come from, so soft? I never heard Song dat soft!"

"Him! Duh boy here, dis boy. It's you."

"Me?"

"Yeah, yeah! Because you still too young. But some day you gon' come along with *us*!"

"I'll come now."

"Not yet," said the reggaezza. "Grow some. Get in some trouble. Look at dose legs you got!—dancer, ain't you? Well, baby brudder, yull dance much better with yo heart broke bad."

"The best dancers need a broken heart?"

"Yup."

"Is your heart broken?"

"Oh, *sure*. And fresh every day. Yull see." The reggaezza lay her head on the boy one's shoulder and closed her eyes.

The reggaezzo said, "I member how bad it was, Johnny boy, but you just got to stay patient. By and by some night you gon' hear all ten, twelve living come up duh road, and a tousand ghosts. Duh sweetest Song you ever heard by far. Duh singers all singing, some with carry-drum playing, and I be dere with duh guitarristas. You come on down dancing and join us. Climb high up duh Ladder-to-Heaven. We'll take you over Mevilla. Get you some lights like dese."

A galaxy spiraled on the reggaezzo's cheek, clotted at the center with stars algae-colored and luminous—he reached to touch one. And felt nothing but hot human skin, though his fingertips came away flickering green. He brought up the glimmers to his face, wanting to see them better, but the bright motes suddenly winged off his hand, back to the reggaezzo's cheek where they'd been. The shock of it was like a roach scuttling away, then abruptly bursting into flight back towards your head. With a squeak and jump, he stumbled over some hairy half of broken coconut, and fell in the sand. The pretty reggaezzo laughed, showing bright teeth. "Scared you, huh?"

As a keepsake of this night, he wanted know: "What is your name?"

"Ain't got one. Soon as you one of us, yo name just wash away out of duh world forever."

"But what was it before? Your name back when you lived with your Mamans and your Papas?"

"I told you: I don't know. The name missing and won't be found. Like a wave come to duh beach last year, where dat wave now? If God know all things, She forgot *my* name. It's just gone. Call me

reggaezzo, call her *reggaezza*, if you want. We nothing else."

The reggaezza leapt up, the poncho falling away, and she cried out, "I feel good! I feel good! Let's go way over dere where it's more room and brudder you just play me a fast song, a wild song, duh strongest song you got! Let's go, let's go, let's go!"

She tore away through the crowd and the reggaezzo snatched up his guitarra and ran away after her. *Stay put*, Batalha had said, and those words pulled him back down, chained to that spot in the sand, or he'd surely have followed. He reckoned it was all right to reach over and gather back his poncho just lying there abandoned. So he did. Then a new thing stirred in him and the chains broke. *Get in some trouble*, she had said. He stood up.

"*O ermano mio*." O my brother!

He looked back towards the cry and there came his sister staggering. She was bloodsoaked, awash in gore, the knife hanging from her grip and dripping, it was that wet.

"Batalha! They cut you? Where are you hurt?"

"Me? No. I'm fine." Seeing the condition of her knife, she stropped off the wet black shine onto her ruined poncho, and slid the blade back in its sheath. "That other time I stuck the saltdog just a little and it was enough to scare him off." Batalha sounded very sad, nothing like herself. "This dude though—he just wouldn't quit. He wouldn't go away. I had to cut him down stone dead."

φ

[Todas las noches]

[redacted] saw the reggaezzi once before. He was too young to remember.

As a baby, at the Festival of San Maurizio: when the reggaezzi come down in force to give a show on the seafront Board. Then, Johnnys bring out their ailing loved ones, their sick of heart, their babies, and any family grown elderly or close to passing. Great blessing will visit whosoever attends San Maurizio. No reggaezzi miss who yet live. If all are there, then surely those bereft parents in the crowd need only crane their heads, and blink away the tears, to catch a glimpse of their doomed youth, *their* child. Which one? What was his or her name? They no longer know—but perhaps the one on drums, or that other one there, dancing, had been theirs.

Savary takes him off the breast and turns him round. She sits him up on the shelf of a forearm. "There, [redacted]! You see them?"

He cannot see *much*. Why won't they let him down and free, to wriggle forward through the crowd as Batalha had? They're all crushed among jostling hundreds back here, though nobody is frightened, so he's not either. Certainly [redacted] can hear the *song*. Sweet and powerful, a choir delves deep and soars high, all to the greater glory of one soloist, some apocalyptic soprano. Drumbeats, wild and precise, overwhelm the rhythms of his own heart and breath; in time, ecstatic, [redacted] shudders, held perched to Savary's breasts. But glimpses are few and far between, as are the gaps among arms and backs and shoulders of the crowd. There's nothing much to see, really, save occasional flashes of green light.

"*Mamita,* really now! How's the baby supposed to see from way down there? Give me him." Jahs lifts him away and up, a full foot higher to her shoulders where at last there's some bit of view. Those gorgeous lights belong to *people*. Green glow freckles their skin, and some great master, perhaps the music itself, exerts sublime puppetry on the abandoned leaping of their bodies. Still, he can only see top halves, only torsos.

"More, more!" [redacted] beats fists atop the head against his belly, punishing its offensive and inadequate height.

"Baby, *stop*. What are you doing? What's the matter with you?"

Jahs's chief attributes are goodness, clarity, and strength. The thing called for now, however, is *stature*.

"Papa, up up!" he shouts, stretching his hands toward Redamas: much the tallest being in the crowd, and from whose shoulders, once [redacted] is hefted there on high, the vantage is astounding.

Grace is down *here*, available to the flesh for embodiment at every single moment. These wonderful creatures are showing him how to *do* it! Wildly [redacted] sobs, shaking his head, wrapping his arms tight about Redamas's brow, when Jahs reaches to lift him down for mothercomfort. "No no no," he screams. I want to "see!" I want to "see!" Beauty's only ever a soft thing? It never harrows?

"Woman—*ow*. Why are you hitting me, Jahs? Don't hit! You see the boy is holding on for dear life. He wants to *watch*."

"Man, my baby is crying! You hand him down to me, Redy, or I will *cut you like a pirate* right here in the streets!"

Steal the Sky

Erik Owomoyela

Running Hawk was the sort of woman who gets harder to describe, the more words you try to use.

She spent ten years in boarding school where they tried to make her a proper American, but she'd tell me it only half worked. She wouldn't answer to Lucy, the name they'd given her, and she named our ship *Wakinyan*, after the Lakota thunder spirit. But she didn't wear beads or put feathers in her hair, and the buckskin jacket and scarf she favored made her look more Calamity Jane than Pocahontas. And as much as she hated the memory of that school, she never tried going back to her people.

A long time went by before she truly made sense to me. And it was quite an adventure along the way.

∫

We dropped tether at Lancaster Airfield after braving one of the worst storms I ever flew in, spending a full day being blown sideways across the Sand Hills and dodging twisters above the Platte. We had been up all night, dropped most of our ballast, and our engine was burning on embers, but we expected the trouble was behind us.

By the time we secured the airship and set foot on the ground, three men in Navy blue had arrived to explain how wrong we were.

"The Naval Air Corps needs a fast ship for a critical mission," Commander William Kendrick declared, a bare second after we'd been introduced. He had blond hair trimmed into respectable sideburns, and enough of a tan to show he didn't work at a desk, but he was already sweating himself dry in the Nebraska sun. To his left was a scrawny Lieutenant who wore a brass harness so a bald eagle could perch on his shoulder, and to his right were a stocky Master Chief and a chimpanzee in a tiny uniform that I didn't know what to make of.

Hawk just folded her arms and stared at them all. She didn't have much time for men with authority on the best of days, and I gathered that I would have to be the reasonable one.

"How can we help the Navy, Commander?" I asked.

Kendrick nodded to the Master Chief, who whistled at the chimp, which hopped forward and thrust a folded piece of crisp white paper out in our direction. I took it, once it was clear Hawk didn't mean to.

"The USS *Dayton*, our most advanced airship, was taken last night in a mutiny," Kendrick said, as I unfolded the paper. On it were a number of very small words, a signature, and a stamp with the Navy seal. "Recovering that ship is critical for the national defense."

Without looking away from the Commander, Hawk held out her hand toward me. I gave her the paper, which she folded back up and stuck under her arm after barely a glance at it.

Kendrick was looking from myself to Hawk and then back again, the way folks usually do when they see a Negro man and an Indian woman and they need to treat one of us with respect. As usual, he settled on me. "Now, Mr. …West, was it?" We'd been introduced not half a minute earlier. "Obviously, we're in need of the fastest ship we can find, and it seems your ship—"

"My ship," Hawk said.

Kendrick blinked at her, as if he had started to think she was mute.

"Her ship," I agreed. Technically the ship belonged to E.W. Sweeney, our sponsor, but he wasn't there to speak up.

Kendrick responded like any officer would, by frowning a minute and then talking on as if we hadn't spoke. "Seems you've made excellent time. We weren't expecting any racing ships to arrive before tomorrow."

Hawk shrugged. "The rest of them won't. And if your mutineers are heading for New York, I'll tell them to give your ship back while we're passing them by."

The Commander's frown was creeping into his sideburns. "Miss Hawk—"

"Captain."

Kendrick looked about to choke for a second. "*Captain* Hawk, I shouldn't need to explain how serious this is. Your country is in need of you."

"*My* country?" Hawk scoffed out the first word with her least ladylike snort. "I don't think I need any more uniforms telling me what *your* country wants."

I did not want to see where this line of conversation would end. "I think what Hawk means," I began, "is—"

"I can speak for myself," Hawk interrupted, eyes still on Kendrick. "And I say what I mean."

Hawk puts a lot of importance into getting her way. From the look of him, so did Kendrick. "Whatever issue you have with your government, Miss Hawk, this is a matter of the utmost importance. Your *cooperation*—" he stressed the word "—would be a service."

Hawk spat on the ground. The Navy men all flinched; even the eagle ruffled its feathers a bit. “I need to check my ship,” she said. “We’ve had a rough night.”

The Navy men didn’t make any move to stop her from stalking off and disappearing around the far side of our docking tower. I wondered why for a second, until I noticed they all had their eyes on me.

“I’m sorry about her,” I said, using my most sorrowful voice. “Most of her family died in the Indian Wars, and she doesn’t care for uniforms much.”

Kendrick just shook his head. “I don’t have the time for this woman’s sensibilities, Mr. West, whatever she blames the Navy for. I’d appreciate if you talked some reason into her.”

At least he thought I was someone he could work with. We discovered early on that Hawk has a talent for making me look like a gentleman by comparison. “It’s not all personal,” I said. “We have a lot riding on this race. There’s a five-hundred-dollar purse for the first ship to reach Omaha, and a thousand for the first to New York. For folks like us, that’s our future on the line.”

That didn’t seem to impress him. “Mr. West, our whole nation’s future could be on the line here. Our aerial Navy is critical to security in the northwestern frontier, and the *Dayton* isn’t any small part of that. What you do here is going to get noticed, all the way back to Washington.”

I didn’t see what a few hills in Dakota or trees in Oregon had to do with the future of America, but I let that go. “Even so, she’s not likely to help just out of patriotism. At the least, she’ll want to fly on to Omaha and collect the five hundred.”

Kendrick’s scowl never seemed to run out of new lines to make on his face. “She wants money, is that it? Damn mercenaries.”

“It’s not just that, sir. We were in San Francisco four days ago; if we can make Omaha by tonight, that’s two days faster than anyone’s done before. Money’s not nothing, but she really wants the record.”

“Well, she’ll have to settle for money. Because the Navy needs your ship, Mr. West, and you’re not flying up to Omaha just to get your names in the papers while our property is out there being hijacked.”

I knew not to try pushing the matter past that. “I’ll talk to her,” I said, and left the man loitering by the ship.

Wakinyan was the only ship tethered in the airfield, and so we had attracted a fair bit of attention: Already a dozen dockhands and a pair of great apes were hauling up crates of provisions, coal, wood and ballast, or just milling around for a chance to be around some action. It was typical for Lancaster: This was 1884, and the city had grown large enough to get one foot out of the frontier, but it was still a long way west of the Mississippi.

Hawk was standing apart from the crowd, watching as a couple smaller monkeys scrambled over *Wakinyan*'s rigging to make sure all the knots held.

"There was a kid posting these around," she announced, handing me a piece of newsprint featuring a decent likeness of our ship soaring above a mass of bold printed text.

LUCY RUNNING HAWK

- and -

CASSIUS WEST

Flying WAKINYAN,

The RED THUNDER!

Fastest airship in America!

San Francisco to Omaha in FOUR DAYS!

NEW YORK IN TEN!

- Sponsored by E.W. Sweeney & Co. -

"Sweeney doesn't waste time," I said. The language aside, it was some impressive advertising. Our own likenesses weren't nearly as accurate as *Wakinyan*'s, and Hawk had so many feathers drawn in her hair that she seemed to be wearing a peacock. But I suppose there weren't any other airships with an Indian captain and a Negro engineer for folks to confuse us with.

"Fifteen hundred miles in four days," Hawk said. She stood a full head shorter than I did, but somehow she never had to look up at me. "This was our year, Cassius."

"Something always happens," I said, with a shake of my head. "And the next time you go insult the Federals to their face, I wouldn't mind a bit of warning. We're lucky they don't just take the ship and try flying it themselves."

Hawk shrugged. "I'd be surprised if any of those uniforms knew the first thing about piloting. They need an ape just to carry their papers." She handed the Navy's requisition letter back to me. "You got them around to payment?"

That was when I started to realize where her head had really been.

“He said the word. But they didn’t mention a number.”

“Perfect.” She smiled, a tight one that only used half her mouth. “Well, since running off on their mission means forfeiting the race, I’d say the Navy owes us for the purse we gave up. At least half, I’d say.”

“You want me to ask the Navy for five hundred dollars?” I shook my head, to stop myself smiling.

Hawk shrugged. “I’d ask for the full thousand, but go on and be the reasonable one. We’ll let Sweeney worry out the details.”

And with that, she was off to converse with one of the dockhands. I was less convinced her approach would get us a higher compensation rather than have the Navy impound our ship, but experience told me not to argue. Deranged as her ideas usually sound, Hawk always finds a way to be right.

∫

Navy airships are giant, lumbering monsters, so finding the *Dayton* wasn’t much trouble. She was headed north along the Missouri under full sail, her engines idle. An airship under sail is a curious sight, like a pair of double-masters flipped on their sides and welded keel to keel; and the *Dayton* had more galleon about her than any other ship I’d seen.

“Sure is something, isn’t she?” asked Lieutenant Baines, the eagleman, as we watched her through the engine house windows. He had to shout to be heard over the engine, which was chugging like mad about six feet behind us. “She lifts three times as much weight as the cruisers Farragut had at the Battle of Montgomery. I’m a little surprised we caught her so quick.”

“There’s no smoke,” I replied. “She’s not running her engines.” The wind was gusting up from the south at better than forty knots, and *Wakinyan* had no sails worth mentioning, so we would have had a much rougher time if the *Dayton* had been under power.

Baines, though, seemed more concerned about Montgomery. He was the youngest of the Navy men by about a decade, so he had the recruit’s sense of adventure along with a fondness for chatter. “You know, I did some service in the rebel states.”

I just looked at him. The kid would have barely been born when Montgomery fell.

“Missed the real war, of course, but I got a bit of action tracking Forrest’s militias.” He paused, as though he were waiting for my comment. “It’s a funny place, the South.”

I am always impressed by the Northern white boys who assume I must have a slave story I’m dying to tell. “Wouldn’t know,” I said. “I grew up in Chicago, myself.”

"Really?" He looked honestly surprised. "I mean, it's just I knew some folks from Chicago. You don't sound like them."

I just shook my head. "And where would you be from?"

"Iowa City." Baines seemed to know to change the subject, at least. "Serving in the frontier is a real dream for me. That's why I learned beast-talking to start with. Not a lot of settlers bother, so the Navy's always looking."

"Speaking of beasts, isn't that your eagle?" I pointed to a silhouette swooping in at us.

Baines took the bait, and squinted at the bird for a moment until it became a bit more obvious. "That's a good eye, Mr. West! Excuse me a minute."

His exit more than doubled the free room I had in the engine house, which was crammed full of Navy gear and munitions. Expecting I wouldn't have another chance to stretch my legs for a while, I followed him outside.

Aft of our pilothouse, a pair of gangways ran under the length of *Wakinyan*'s hull, framed by some rigging and the open sky. The Navy had lashed even more crates between them, along with a big iron-banded cage holding the half-dozen chimpanzees that made up their strike team. Their uniforms were tiny versions of the black-threaded jerseys and blue caps worn by Marines, and dangerous-looking iron batons were strapped to their backs.

Rodgers, the Master Chief, was barking orders at them in that odd sort of speech folks use when they haven't quite learned beast-speak, where you take half a sentence and say it twice: "You board and capture. Board and capture! Detain all on board. Detain all!"

I had been making it a point to ignore this monkey business on the voyage so far, and so I tried to continue. I watched as the eagle swooped in to land on the perch the Navy had secured to our rigging and screeched out its report to Baines, and then as Baines disappeared into the pilothouse to relay it. But eventually I couldn't help myself.

"Why the hats?" I called.

Rodgers grunted. "They're uniforms. Apes need authority, just like men do." He pointed at one ape in particular, with a gold trim on his hat. "That one's the Beast-Sergeant. The hat tells the others to follow him."

I couldn't think of any reply, and Rodgers didn't look intent on hearing one either. Baines, though, was talking almost the second he came out of the pilothouse. "We'll come right alongside!" he exclaimed. "They haven't run out the guns, and there's no movement on deck. It's like there's no defense at all."

"'Course not," said Rodgers. "Miracle they can even fly her."

I wasn't sure what any of that meant, except that I should be

getting back to the engine. I arrived just in time to catch Hawk calling through the voicepipe: *"Spin us down. Match their speed."*

That was the first I'd heard from her since we'd run up the engine on our way out from Lancaster, which was about usual: Hawk wasn't much for talking, in the air or on the ground. I didn't bother to answer, just opened one of the relief valves to ease down our speed by two or three knots as we fell in alongside the *Dayton*.

Hawk maneuvered us just outside the *Dayton*'s port mainsail, which left us staring right into their bridge—an ironclad cabin attached to the bottom of her hull. I couldn't quite see Rodgers out on our gangway, but I saw the grapple he threw to snare the *Dayton*'s rail. Then I saw the apes, shimmying across the line one after the other as if we weren't a thousand feet up in the air.

A minute later, once the apes had disappeared up into the hull, Rodgers himself appeared on the line, secured with a harness and dragging himself across hand over hand. His progress was a good deal clumsier, and the wind was picking up: One gust snatched the cap right off his head, sent it flopping into the *Dayton*'s sail, then falling toward the plains below.

I was so caught up in the drama of it all that at first I didn't notice how slack the rope was getting, or how the *Dayton*'s end was rising. Either we were losing altitude, or they were gaining it—and either way, we were drifting closer.

"More steam," Hawk's voice instructed, just as all this was dawning on me. I stoked the boiler as she turned us a few degrees away, aiming to keep us clear of the rough air behind the *Dayton*'s sails.

A moment later, I caught what looked like a puff of upside-down smoke underneath the other ship. A second after that, two more. I must have gotten used to the idea of the ship being abandoned, because it took me a second to realize she was dropping ballast.

That was about when all hell broke loose.

My first warning was a couple muffled shouts through the voicepipe: I couldn't make out the words, but it was Kendrick's voice, and he sounded worked up about something. A second later, something *thud*ded against the side of the engine house, and I turned to see a monkey staring at me through the porthole.

It scurried away almost as quick as it appeared, but I could tell this wasn't one of Rodgers' apes: The head was smaller, the fur lighter, and it had the long, spindly arms of a spider monkey. It had a Navy tunic and cap, but they were white, making it a sailor instead of a commando.

The Navy hadn't brought any sailor monkeys along, and we were a thousand feet up in the air, so there wasn't much question about where it had come from.

"Hey!" I shouted, picking my way out of the engine house. I wasn't

sure what I was going to do, but I didn't like the thought of any intruders from a ship full of mutineers crawling around our rigging. Sure enough, three of them were up monkeying with the canvas that streamlined our hull. And they were making quick work: We already had corners flapping free and billowing up in the wind. I might have been impressed, if the sight wasn't so irritating.

Standing out there and yelling "Hey! Git!" didn't seem to do much good, but there wasn't much more I could manage without climbing up in the rigging myself, so I went ahead and kept at it. I was wondering if I should go back in, fetch my poker from the engine, and try shaking that at them, when the hatch to our pilothouse opened and Commander Kendrick charged out, pistol drawn, with Baines following quick on his heels.

"Goddamn traitor monkeys!" he roared, taking aim at the nearest of them. I managed to shout out a protest just as he pulled the trigger. Thankfully the shot missed our hull, but it missed the monkey too, and they all scurried out of sight.

"Watch out!" I called. "You hit our gasbag and we're done for!"

"I know what I'm doing!" he shouted back, holding on to our rigging with one hand and waving the pistol with another, looking for the monkeys to come back.

None of us had been watching the *Dayton* during all this. Else, the cannon blast might not have been such a surprise.

When we'd pulled alongside, the *Dayton*'s gun ports were all closed. But sometime after the monkeys came over, two guns had been rolled out. Hawk must have seen it, and she pitched our nose upward to clear their line of fire, but she didn't quite have enough time.

The storm we flew through on the way from Cheyenne had given me a healthy appreciation for how thunder sounds close up, so a four-inch cannon twenty yards off was really a bit underwhelming. When the scattershot hit us, though, that was something new. One of our gangways exploded in a mess of splintered wood, and half a dozen lines snapped along the hull. Baines lost his balance and fell into the rigging, while that monkey cage dropped out the bottom of our ship until it caught on a tangle of half-broken rope.

I recovered enough to make a dive back into the engine house, around the time the second cannon's blast shredded the front of our pilothouse and the bottom of *Wakinyan*'s nose.

Looking back, it's a miracle that neither shot opened our gasbags; some of those pellets couldn't have missed by more than a few inches. But what happened was nearly as bad.

To balance all the extra weight the Navy had loaded into our engine house, we'd left behind all of the ballast we normally loaded

on *Wakinyan*'s aft. That left a dozen full sandbags lined up under the nose—and judging by the way we pitched upward after that second shot, it must have torn through them all. Reflex and a nearby safety line saved me from being pitched right into the boiler, and all those Navy crates started groaning against the ropes that held them in place.

A jolt ran through the ship, I could feel the deck spinning under me. The line Rodgers and the apes had used to board the *Dayton* was still tethering our ships together, and now it was like to either tear us apart or force us into ramming them.

I finally managed to reach the emergency valve and close off the engine, sending all the steam straight into the hot-air chamber in the center of our hull. I hoped that would help balance out the ship, which was now pitched up at a good forty-five degrees, and it would definitely mean a smaller chance of colliding with the *Dayton*. But to stop *Wakinyan* from groaning herself apart, that tether needed to go.

Climbing back out of the engine house was no easy task, with the ship twisting and listing and shuddering at every gust of air. Those Navy crates were doing their best to shake themselves free of their ropes, and I had to crawl between them on my hands and knees if I had any chance of reaching open air. That was where I found myself when the ship made its wildest lurch yet and the crates nearly jumped off the deck, coming down to pin my legs between them.

I was out in the open from the waist up, so I had a fine view of how much trouble we were in. We weren't just pitching nose up, but listing to the side, and that tether had gone completely taut. What's more, I could hear the *Dayton*'s engines chugging up, which meant they were trying to leave us behind. Assuming that tether didn't snap, which it probably would have already if it was going to, we would end up crashing right into the flying fortress' tail if we were lucky—and her propellers if we weren't.

Trying to pull yourself free of a munitions crate with no good purchase on a deck slanted two different ways is not an easy thing. One crate's corner was digging into my ankle, and I had to twist onto my side in hopes of wiggling my foot through, and then the other caught the heel of my boot. I tried to push the crates apart, and tried not to notice that one of the hooks that secured the crates on top was starting to work loose from the bulkhead, and then I noticed something else.

One of the *Dayton*'s sailor monkeys was scampering over our rigging, holding a knife in its mouth. By the time I worked out what I was seeing, it had reached the bollard where the tether had been fixed and started sawing through it with the knife.

I finally found some leverage against the crates, bracing my hands

against one and my legs against the other, and pushed with all the strength I could manage. That got me a couple of inches, which was just enough to pull my legs free, and I did that just soon enough to grab hold of the rigging before the monkey cut through the line. The rope snapped, and our ship lurched again, but the deck evened out a bit and the protests from the frame of our hull died down.

For a moment, it seemed almost quiet, although that wasn't really so. There was still the wind flapping through the mess of our rigging and the canvas on our hull, the rattling of the monkey cage as it hung from the remnants of our gangway, and the creaking of our beams as the wind slowly spun us around. And there was the chugging of the *Dayton*'s engines as that ship steamed away.

∫

The cannon blast that had ripped through our pilothouse had struck Hawk at least twice in her right arm, badly enough to merit a bandage that was soaked near through by now. She hadn't bothered with a sling, and she had taken to flexing her hand almost obsessively to make sure it would still be useful.

"Good thing we lost that wind," she said, eyeing the rigging we had spent all afternoon trying to secure. It was near evening, and the weather had calmed to a lazy breeze, but we could still see ruffles pop up along the hull as loose canvas caught the air. "I wouldn't trust us at better than twelve knots right now."

"The *Dayton* can make twenty in calm skies at full steam," Commander Kendrick complained. We were gathered on *Wakinyan*'s remaining gangway: Kendrick, Hawk, Baines, and myself. Rodgers had either made it onto the *Dayton*, where he was probably a captive, or fallen a quarter-mile into the Missouri. "Every second takes them farther away; we can't afford to sit here!"

"We're in no condition to chase them," Hawk replied. We had fallen to within fifty feet of the ground before stabilizing the ship, and most of the Navy's crates had gone overboard to keep us lighter than air. I'd kept the boiler lit, but Hawk and I weren't keen to start running the propellers again. "And after what that ship did to mine, I'm not in a hurry to catch up."

"You listen, miss." Kendrick leveled a finger at her. "That is *my* ship out there, and I'm not letting a bunch of monkeys take her away from me."

Hawk glared icicles back at him. "Seems you already have. And let's talk about those monkeys."

Kendrick had insisted that we keep the cage that had held Rodgers' apes, even though it weighed as much as three of the crates we'd pitched overboard, so that we could use it to lock up the three

monkeys that had boarded us. After all the trouble they had caused us up until then, they had gone in with no protest at all.

"What about them?" Kendrick asked.

"You and your man spent all afternoon shouting at them while we tried to secure the ship," said Hawk. "What do they know that's so important?"

"How they took my ship!" said Kendrick. "If these monkeys can hijack a Navy airship, Lord knows what else they're capable of!"

That caught my attention. "You told us the *Dayton*'s crew mutinied," I said. "You don't mean the monkeys took her by *themselves*?"

Kendrick looked to be grinding his teeth. "The *Dayton* uses twenty monkeys to manage the rigging and the engines. They're some of the most highly trained in the fleet."

"Trained enough to fly a ship with no officer?" I asked.

"Well, they're saying they didn't," Baines put in. "According to them, they were acting on orders from an officer."

"Is that so?" Hawk looked more interested in that than anything else that had been said. The others didn't seem to notice.

"It's a damn lie," said Kendrick. "All our beast handlers are accounted for."

"Do monkeys lie?" I asked.

"They just mutinied!" The pitch of Kendrick's voice jumped almost beyond reason. "If monkeys stole my airship, they can damn well lie!"

Hawk was nodding, and looked like she might be amused if she weren't being so grim. "That's why you needed a racer. Any of your frigates could have caught the *Dayton*, but you'd have monkeys on those crews. And you don't trust them now."

Kendrick looked like he wanted to keep shouting, but he nodded. "The Commodore's orders. If we really have a problem with their kind mounting some rebellion, we don't want to give them more chances."

This didn't quite make sense to me, for what seemed like an obvious reason. "What about the ones you had in that cage before?" I asked. "You didn't mind sending them to the *Dayton*."

"Chimps aren't monkeys. They're apes." Kendrick said it as though he was talking to the stepchild of the cousin he'd never liked. "And they showed no interest in the mutiny. Besides, a human boarding team wouldn't have fit on this ship. And all this is a waste of time!" He turned back to Hawk, and jabbed his finger again. "You were enlisted to help us secure the *Dayton*. She is heading north, under steam, and if the wind holds, she'll be in Canada within a day. You will *not* let the British Empire get their hands on that ship!"

Hawk glared at him for a second, with the look she gets when she needs to make a decision fast. And then she smiled, with the look she gets when she's about to cause trouble. "If you want your ship back, we need to get mine back in flying shape. That means tightening the canvas, securing the rigging, and losing that cage. I only see one good way to do all that."

"What exactly are you…?" Kendrick went speechless for a good, long moment, as he followed Hawk's gaze down to the monkey cage. I could swear those monkeys were standing at attention. "Are you out of your goddamn mind, woman? They're the ones who did all this!"

"And now they're going to fix it."

"Last time they were free, they all but crashed this ship! How do you know they won't finish the job?"

"Because they didn't last time. They saved my ship by cutting that tether, while you were trying to shoot holes in it."

"Hold on, Hawk," I said, before Kendrick could shout something else. "Not wanting us to crash is one thing. Why are they going to help us catch the others?"

Hawk nodded at Baines, who had been standing quietly over the monkey cage through all this. "Why did you say they decided to mutiny?"

Baines winced. "I'm honestly not sure they know what a mutiny is, ma'am. I've never tried explaining it to an animal before. But they say it was all on orders."

"And I'm telling you, there's none of our officers on board that ship!" Kendrick roared.

"Doesn't need to be one of yours," Hawk. "Long as they thought it was."

When I worked out what she was driving at, I couldn't stop myself from whistling. The utterly lost expression on the Navy men's face was priceless.

"The uniforms," I said. "You trained them to obey anyone who's wearing the right hat."

Kendrick looked as though the sky had just turned upside down. "Jesus Christ almighty."

"The good news," said Hawk, "is that you both have the right hats. So tell them to fix my ship."

Kendrick drew himself up, practically standing on tiptoes to bring himself up to Hawk's eye level. "Miss, you do not tell me what to do. I am a commander in the United States Navy."

"And you're on *my* ship." Hawk glared him full in the eye. "I'm not telling you to do anything, and I'm not asking your permission." She turned half away, looking down at the monkeys, then stopped. "But I will need your man to do the talking."

They stared at each other for another minute. The sun cast a harsh pattern of shadows across Hawk's face, and a gust of wind rippled through the hull.

"All right," Kendrick growled. "You'll have this your way. And you'll be responsible for whatever this mission comes to. Baines, do what she says."

Hawk nodded, turned, and disappeared into the pilothouse. I supposed the business was over and started back toward the engine, but only made it to the door before Kendrick stopped me.

"Mr. West," he began, waving me into the engine house and then stepping in himself. We had tossed all the crates overboard in order to balance out the ship, so there was actually enough room for us to stand. "Your captain. How long have you flown with her?"

"About a year, now," I said. "Long enough to learn that she knows what she's doing."

"Well, she's proven she can fly," said Kendrick. "But she clearly doesn't care about the politics at issue." He folded his arms, taking what I supposed was his most authoritative pose. "Ever since they took Alaska, the British have been looking for a chance to win back the Oregon Country, and the only force to stop them is our superior air power. It's bad enough if we can't trust our monkeys, but losing our most advanced flying fortress to them? Just imagine a British Navy with airships like that."

I didn't know the first thing about the British Navy, or care much about whose flag flew over Oregon Country, but I supposed I should keep quiet.

"Might be different," Kendrick mused, "if our armies weren't tied up, keeping peace in the South." He paused at that, no doubt to see how I'd react. "But I suppose that's the price we pay for freeing your people."

It seems almost impossible for Federals to complain about the British without finding some way to bring up Forrest's rebellion. Mostly, I just wished that Kendrick had more tact in him. "From what I remember," I said, "first thing the rebel states did was go running to the British. If you hadn't broken the Confederates, you'd have enemy armies to north and south."

"True enough," said Kendrick. "But, you know, there's folks who argue abolition didn't go far enough. They say the North uses beasts the way the South used men, and we're both just as damned in the eyes of the Lord." He was clearly trying to read me now. "You buy any of that?"

"Why should I? Beasts aren't people."

"And what about your captain? All that harmony-of-life talk do anything for her?"

I probably should have worked it out sooner. Kendrick wanted me to tell him whether Hawk might sympathize with the monkeys, but didn't quite want to ask the question. And I didn't see much reason to save him the trouble.

"Hawk isn't political," I told him. "She cares about flying, and she's better at it than anybody I've seen. If she doesn't catch your ship, that means it can't be caught."

Kendrick leaned forward. "You know that for sure? Suppose she's faking, about not knowing what the monkeys are saying. Suppose she could talk to them all along. Beast-talking's an Indian thing, isn't it? Why *wouldn't* she know?"

"I couldn't say," I said, trying to sound neutral. "But Hawk didn't spend much time with her people. Most of her education came at the boarding school."

"Can't say I ever saw the point of those schools. Sure, you can take the girl away from the savages, but can you take the savage out of the girl?"

It was getting harder to keep a blank face. "I've heard a lot of talk like that in my life," I said. "Never found it all that convincing."

Kendrick looked at me for another moment. "Just know one thing. You and your captain have found yourselves in the middle of a pivotal moment. History, and the United States Navy, will take a great interest what you do here. So I hope that you'll show yourself as a patriot."

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The monkeys didn't show any sign of conspiracy and kept working well into twilight. Even so, *Wakinyan* had taken quite a pounding over the last few days, and a new wind came down from the northeast with a vengeance after dark. I spent the night wondering if it wouldn't shake us apart.

For Hawk and myself, this was our second night without sleep, and I suppose we were both on edge. I know I was, but I could never quite tell what Hawk was thinking back then.

When I came forward, around midnight, I told myself it was to see how she was doing. It would have been a cold night even without the wind, and the *Dayton*'s cannon had shattered both the windscreen and the pilothouse's lamp. Hawk stood there in the dark, still as you please, but her shoulders were sagging as if the whole ship weighed down on them.

"What do you suppose they plan to do if we catch the *Dayton* again?" she asked. With the wind whipping through the cabin, she sounded a lot farther away than she was. "Two men couldn't even fly an airship that size, much less capture it. And there's no more apes to

do their work for them."

It might have been the wind that put the bite in her voice, but I didn't quite like what I heard. "What is this with you and the monkeys?" I asked.

I think she shrugged, but it was hard to know in the dark. "I wanted to keep my ship flying, and they were the ones who could fix it."

"Because they're the ones who *did* the damage," said I. "Kendrick had a fair point. How are you so sure you know better?" I'd meant to say *knew*, but that's not how the word came out. I suppose I could blame that on the wind, too.

She looked back at me, pulling her goggles up to her forehead. I still couldn't see her eyes so much as the moonlight reflected in them. "Because I do," she said. And then she stared at me for a good long minute.

"How do you even plan to catch them again?" I asked. "With winds like this, I'd be surprised if we're moving north at all."

"I'm not going to fly us harder than I have to." Hawk turned back around. "Not when I can't see my hand in front of my face."

"So you'll gamble with the monkeys, but not the wind?"

Hawk turned back around at that. "What is this with *you* and the monkeys?" she asked. "There something you want to say?"

There was, but I needed a second to get my thoughts together. "During the war, I was working in a shipyard, when they started to figure out apes could do their grunt work. The other boys like me were there because we believed in freedom and the Union and wanted to help, but none of that mattered to the man in charge. And when all the white boys were coming home from war and we all had to step aside, he sure didn't mind keeping the monkeys around. This is what they do in the North because they can't have slaves, and just try to get a decent wage when your competition will work for food. Hell, try and get a job at all."

"And what part of that do you think is the monkey's fault?" Hawk asked. "What exactly do you want, Cassius? Should I throw the monkeys overboard and then fly my ship apart, so you can impress the white man? Because what that story tells me is that you care a lot more about your country than they ever did about you."

She hadn't even looked at me when she spoke, and that burned just as much as the words did. "Did you just question my loyalty? I put a year of my life into getting this ship together, and it's just as much mine as yours."

That made her turn around. "I put my entire life into getting here! This sky was my place. This was where I decide where to fly, and no badge or uniform or top hat was around to tell me different. Tell me

this isn't just a job for you."

"*Just* a job? You think there's a lot of work out there for a Negro engineer?" I replied. We'd been all but shouting the whole time, just to be heard through the wind, but we were going all for it now. "You know the kind of jobs they put us to? Whatever's too big for the animals, but that white boys won't touch. And sure as hell there's nothing else like this. You're a damn spectacle; folks would drop a nickel just to see you in the goggles, but I'm just a black man with a wrench."

"So I'm a curiosity, you think. Like a trained monkey."

"Oh, *now* you think monkey's an insult."

She stared at me for a moment, then turned back to the wheel and still didn't speak for a minute. The wind shifted a little, sending a ruffle through the canvas we'd drawn over the ruined front of the pilothouse.

"Just because we're not the same as a monkey or a bird," she said, "doesn't make them nothing. And all our wisdom doesn't matter if we don't take the time to *think*."

"Who isn't thinking?" I replied. "You know Kendrick doesn't trust you, thinks you might want to lose the *Dayton* on purpose. I've been defending you ever since we met him!"

"Well, stop it!" She shot back what I assume was a mean glare over her shoulder. "I don't need any defense from you, and especially the kind you give." Her voice took on an unflattering mimic of my accent. "'Please forgive us, Mister. She's just been so moody, ever since you killed her family. You know how women are.'"

"You didn't seem to mind so much when I was talking him out of five hundred dollars."

She didn't look back at me again, and I decided I'd been away from the engine room long enough. On the way back, I nearly stepped on one of the monkeys, which must have been resting on the gangway. It screeched at me and scrambled off into the rigging.

Kendrick, Baines, and the eagle were in the engine room, with its newfound deck space and working lamp. Kendrick was awake, hunched by the starboard porthole and glaring out into the night.

"Need some damn cities up here," he said. "We could be flying in circles for all I know."

"It's a clear night," I said. "If you step out on the gangway, you can see the stars."

Kendrick ignored the suggestion, and me in general. I stoked the engine and checked that nothing had come loose in my absence, and mostly tried to forget about Hawk at the other end of the ship. I was madder than I'd ever been with her before, but I couldn't quite work out why.

“Commander?” I said, though I had not quite worked out what I was doing there, either. “You have a plan yet for taking back the *Dayton* when we catch her again?”

He straightened at that, turning around to scowl at me. “Do you?”

I nodded. “I bet I could shut down her engines for you, fix them so no monkey can bring them back. Just get me on board.”

∫

We got lucky when day rolled around. The winds had died down but hadn’t turned, so the *Dayton* still couldn’t make sail. And the morning sky showed us a trail of smoke that pointed straight toward Manitoba.

The skies over Dakota let you see a long way, so it was noon by the time we caught up. We couldn’t have been fifty miles from the border, and if the British knew it was coming, their own airships might be on the way to secure their prize. We would only have one more chance.

Hawk brought us in high, so even the cannons on top of *Dayton* would need to fire almost straight up to hit us. Once Hawk had maneuvered us near enough, we threw down a climbing rope, and one of the monkeys scampered down to the *Dayton*’s upper deck, where it secured the line to the ship’s guardrail.

Airship work had taken the worry of heights out of me long before, but what came next was still not an experience I hope to repeat: Taking the firmest hold of the rope that I could, I stepped out from *Wakinyan*’s ruined gangway and began to lower myself down.

The rope ran about sixty feet from end to end, but it felt like half a mile. I discovered that nothing quite impresses you with the openness of the sky like being suspended between two airships, floating hundreds of feet in the air. The Red River twisted through the land below, looking barely wider than my foot, and I supposed that if I lost my grip, I’d have far too much time to reflect on the illusions of scale.

I was about thirty feet from the *Dayton*’s end of the line when something ambled out of the bridge and made for the foredeck. It looked at first like a walking chair, with brass joints clacking against the deck, carrying an animal like a fat gopher that I needed a moment to recognize.

A beaver, in full mechanized suit, no less, wearing a Navy lieutenant’s cap. I supposed that was one mystery solved.

I had never seen one of the suits before, and the thing distracted me for a few quick seconds before the beaver grabbed onto the end of my rope and started gnawing through the knot that secured it to the *Dayton*’s rail. I clambered down four or five more feet before I

realized there was no chance of my reaching the end in time, so I stopped and tightened my grip on the rope about a second before the end snapped off.

Through all this, the *Dayton* had been climbing and drifting to starboard—or *Wakinyan* had been doing the reverse—so I swung well away from the warship. The wind caught me, too, and started spinning me around. As though I needed more worries.

Hanging at the end of a hundred-foot tether above hundreds more feet of air is a fine way to clarify your thoughts. With all the spinning and swinging, I wasn't about to try climbing back up the line, so my best bet was for Hawk to notice and get us back above the *Dayton*, where I could simply drop onto the deck. She seemed to be trying, but struggling to match the other ship's climb. I suppose it didn't help that her engineer was hanging at the end of a rope.

A gust of wind hit me like a runaway carriage, and near blew me free of the tether. I could hear the Dayton's hull creaking as the wind knocked her sideways, and my line took on a remarkable angle to the ground. But the wind did come from just the right direction to push me nearly all the way to the *Dayton*'s hull.

Not exactly the luck I was hoping for, but it would do.

Between the wind pushing me sideways and Hawk finally getting the upper hand in the climbing race, I got within about twenty feet of the *Dayton*'s deck. It was like being on a pendulum that got jammed in midswing above a log rolling downhill, but I supposed it would be my best chance at getting off the rope and onto the ship. I started climbing down toward the end of the rope again, hoping to cut back on the distance I would have to fall.

The beaver must have caught on to my plan. I caught a glimpse of it flipping out a metal tube from the legs of its mechosuit, and aiming it straight at me.

A pistol. Those beavers thought of everything.

I froze, then realized that wasn't exactly helpful, and kept climbing down. The wind was dying and my line was swinging back away from the *Dayton*, which gave the beaver a better angle on me; but I was also getting farther away and bobbing around in the air. The beaver's first shot went wide; its second, too. After that it stopped, waiting for me to close in again.

That I did; Hawk was still maneuvering for position, after all, and I was nearly at the end of the rope. It was a perfect swing: Hawk had me sailing straight toward the deck, and right into line with the beaver's tiny gunsight.

But just as the beaver took its shot, something hit it from behind, and knocked its mechanized legs out from under it. The gun fired high, and the beaver toppled backwards onto the deck.

A few seconds later I sailed over the railing. One of my feet caught on it, and for a second I feared I might fall back into the sky, but I had just enough momentum to carry me forward into an ignoble pile on the deck.

The beaver, I saw, was tangled up with a monkey in a midshipman's uniform. This one's fur looked a good deal lighter than the monkey that had boarded the ship, so it must have been one of those already on board. It seemed to have the beaver well in hand, although the mechosuit's arms were still jerking uselessly around him.

"Thanks," I said. It seemed the decent thing to do.

In return, the monkey started screeching at me, and gesturing above us (with its head, as both arms were still occupied). And at around the same moment, something very large blocked the sun.

I looked up to see *Wakinyan*, very close above us now, with a nasty gash cutting through her hull. By the way the torn canvas was fluttering outward, she was clearly losing gas; and by the speed at which she was falling toward us, she had already lost quite a lot.

Evidently, one of the beaver's shots hadn't missed completely.

"Get inside!" I shouted, although I had no idea if that was a command the monkeys would understand. For my part, I dove through the hatch into the *Dayton*'s hull, then found a ladder that led between two of the ship's giant gasbags and clambered downward as fast as I could.

Before I could reach the bottom, the entire ship lurched, with a series of shudders and a rending noise that put the previous day's excitement to shame. The gasbag behind me bulged outwards—in the manner, I suppose, of a great bladder when sat upon—and crushed me into the ladder; thankfully my face and one of my knees passed between the rungs, but I knew immediately that my legs would be useless for quite a while. Then the entire world pitched sideways, the gasbag shuddered and let out a roar as it began to deflate, and all I could do was hold on and hope we didn't land too hard.

∫

If we had been much higher in the air, I imagine our story would have ended there, and I would have had no chance to relate it to you. Fortunately, both our craft found their way (mostly) into the river. Like any good Navy ship, the *Dayton* was still lighter than water, and she acted rather like a gigantic cushion for *Wakinyan*.

Our airship, of course, had taken no small amount of damage from the collision, but Hawk had managed to direct the impact onto our engine—the heaviest and sturdiest part of the vessel. Even so, neither craft would be flying anywhere any time soon.

“That ship was the cornerstone of the American Central Fleet,” said Commander Kendrick, shaking his head from the shore. His uniform was a mess, his hat had gone missing, and he didn’t seem to mind. “It will take months to restore our capacity now.”

“Then I guess you should hope the Canadians don’t invade in the next few months,” Hawk said. Then she left me to smooth things over.

“You’ve got something of theirs now,” I noted. “That beaver’s mechosuit can’t be something they’ll be happy to part with.”

Kendrick nodded. “Beavers. We knew the Canadians were training beasts, but animals that can impersonate a Navy officer and hijack an airship? This could be the greatest threat our Navy has ever faced.”

I was beginning to wonder about Kendrick’s ability to judge a threat. “By our best guess,” I said, “we’re only about thirty miles north of Grand Forks. If you could float the *Dayton* down the river, could be you might salvage her.”

Kendrick frowned at that. “Float an airship? I don’t know if it’s ever been tried. But if we can repair the gasbags, and bring up a riverboat to guide her…damned if it just might work.” He nodded, as though he had just decided something important. “You’ve done a service to your country, Mr. West. You and your captain both.”

“I appreciate your saying so, Commander,” I said, hoping I didn’t sound arch. “And I hope you’ll remember it didn’t come without sacrifice on our part.”

“Yes, of course,” Kendrick said. “I know what it’s like to lose a vessel, Mr. West. I’ll make sure it’s not forgotten.”

I limped after Hawk, who was standing by the river and looking out at the half-sunk, mangled ruin of the two airships. The *Dayton*’s nose had dug into the riverbank, and the monkeys were busy dragging ashore what supplies they could salvage.

“New York in ten days,” she said, with a shake of her head. It was the first she’d spoken to me since our argument of the previous night, which now felt like it had vanished into the wind. “We would have made it, too.”

“Something always happens,” I said. “This isn’t the end, though. The Navy seems happy with us, and I think they might salvage the ships.”

“The Navy.” Hawk was still staring at Baines and the monkeys. “This whole mess started because they put uniforms on beasts and thought that made them soldiers, but they’re already right back at it. I suppose it’s just too convenient.”

I shrugged. “They’re going to do what they want to do, and make up the reasons later. That’s how it always works. Best we can do is make it work for us.”

Hawk either didn't hear me, or had something else in mind. "Did I ever tell you why I chose the name *Wakinyan*?" she asked, nodding at the wreck. Our ship's hull had snapped near the center, and her nose was sticking upward from the mess of torn canvas and broken girders. With imagination, it might look like a baby bird poking its head out of a ruined nest. "I lost almost everything I knew about my people while I was in that school. But I remember Wakinyan Tanka, the great bird who isn't a bird, whose eyes are lightning and whose voice is thunder. I don't think I ever learned what it was all supposed to mean, but when I remember it, I feel free."

I shook my head, although she still wasn't looking at me. "You never told me that, exactly. But I remember asking why you wanted to fly airships so bad. You said that when you were up there, it felt like you'd stolen the sky."

She turned back around at that. If I were a more daring narrator, I would claim to have seen tears in her eyes, but in truth there was just something in the set of her jaw. For Hawk, that was quite a lot.

"That's why you kept your own name, isn't it?" I continued. "To be a bird that isn't a bird."

A little off to our right, two apes were setting down a slightly waterlogged crate. Hawk took to staring at them for a moment, and then she got her troublemaking look again. "Hold that thought a minute."

With a glance at Baines off in the distance, she strode up to the nearest of the apes. In a motion so quick I barely followed it, she produced a blue Navy cap from her pack and set it on her head—at a fairly jaunty angle, I should say.

"When he goes to sleep—" She pointed at Baines. "—get out of here. Go away. Then do whatever you want. Do anything. Tell all the others, too. Tell all the beasts." The ape ambled off, and Hawk tossed away the hat, turned, and walked right back to me.

I wasn't nearly as surprised as I thought I should be, so I just let out a breath. "So that's where Kendrick's hat went." Hawk just shrugged. "Do you suppose that'll work?"

"It might," she said. "Or they might not understand. That might be for the best; a bunch of monkeys might have a hard time in the Plains. And they might even like flying on airships; I wouldn't blame them for that."

"So why bother?" I asked.

Hawk shrugged. "When people dream of Wakinyan Tanka, seeing the spirit changes them. It turns you upside down and backwards, and everything you do is contrary. Because that's how the spirit works." Then she got the same sly smile she'd had when she told Kendrick to let the monkeys out of the cage. "Or maybe I just like

possibilities."

As the sun inched lower, it passed behind a new mass of grey clouds rolling in from the west. Thunder boomed off in the distance, and we looked destined for another summer rain, though it might still miss us to the south. There in the moment, though, I couldn't bring myself to think it mattered so much. We'd been through storms before.

/sit

Jeremy Sim

Andre Papakostas woke up the Friday before Christmas with a fierce itch in his nose and a sudden, strange craving for meat. The itch had bothered him all night: a sharp, fishhooked pain that felt, weirdly, like an ear infection in the middle of his face.

Andre sat up in bed and shook his head experimentally. *Ouch*, he thought. It was definitely worse than yesterday.

He inspected his nostrils in the bathroom mirror. Was it his imagination, or did his nose look larger? There was a flush of color, bruise-purple, around the edges.

When he spat after brushing he realized that his teeth felt a bit funny too. He ran his tongue over them a few times and grimaced at himself in the mirror. They felt…misaligned. Like they were too clean.

He sighed, eyeing the little tube of hydrocortisone that Dr. Lee had sold him yesterday. He didn't want to admit it, but he was pretty sure this wasn't the kind of problem that could be solved with anti-inflammatories.

He picked up the phone and Skyped Mom.

Ψ

The phone rang eight times before she answered.

"Hello?"

"Mom? It's Andre."

There was a gust of static. Mom's voice piped through, louder than expected. "Oh hi, dear. Guess where we are?"

"You sound like you're standing in a wind tunnel."

"We're at Myrtos. It's *beautiful* here, Andre. *Paul*?" she yelled, suddenly. "Paul, come here. It's Andre, on the phone. Tell him how beautiful it is here."

"It's beautiful," came his stepfather's voice, slightly muted.

"Mom," said Andre.

It was a few seconds before she came back to the phone.

"Hello?" she said.

"Mom."

"Yes?"

"I think I've been hexed again."

Mom was silent for a second. "Oh Andre, again? Are you sure?"

"Yeah. My nose is turning purple and my face is changing shape."

"Oh, Andre. Right when Paul and I are out of the country, too. Are you sure it's a hex, dear? Did you go to Dr. Lee's?"

"He said it was a blocked sebaceous gland and prescribed cortisone."

"Oh, Andre. Oh dear. Didn't I tell you to learn the nine basic counter-hexes? Awareness is all you really need, Andre. It's a self-defense skill."

"That's nice, Mom. When are you coming back?"

"*Paul?*" she yelled. "*When are we going back? What? The twenty-sixth?* The twenty-sixth," she said, at regular volume.

"I'll wait until then," said Andre.

"Are you sure, dear? It's more than a week. You could always ask Nico—"

"I'm not calling Nico, Mom."

"Are you sure? He's been practicing his spells. I think you should give him another chance."

"No."

"Okay. I just thought—well, I thought you should give him a chance to redeem himself."

"No, Mom. I'll wait till you get back. Have a good vacation."

"Alright—"

He hung up. His face hurt.

The twenty-sixth. Eight days away. He stood up, went over to the mirror, looked at himself, and carefully smeared another dose of hydrocortisone cream all over his nose and cheeks.

Ψ

It was someone in the family, obviously. A distant cousin, nephew, aunt, or step-uncle twice removed. It was always the same story. They wanted to keep their hex spells in practice, you know, so they didn't get rusty. And the perfect target? No-magic Andre, who had sworn off magic and publicly insulted Granny Delphine at the family gathering fifteen years ago.

Andre's family had a good memory. And he had a *big* extended family.

He sighed and prodded at his nose. At least it was Christmas. The official season for putting up with annoying relatives.

He tried to look on the bright side. At best, the curse would peter out on its own after a few days. At worst, Mom would be here the

day after Christmas to fix him up. See? Not so bad. He'd survive.

Ψ

At noon, he found a whisker. A whiskertip, actually, protruding from his upper lip like a lone, silvery pioneer. His face tingled when he touched it.

A part of Andre was glad that it wasn't going to be a repeat of any of the year's hexes. Since last January he'd endured a week of tripping over invisible obstacles, a month of saying everything backwards, and a frantic, memorable day where his toenails had started growing out at sixty times the normal rate. This had been a bumper year for crappy hexes.

Animal transformation was a new one. He wondered who had gone to all the trouble. Animal spells were complicated things.

Regardless, thought Andre, he knew how to deal with this.

It was time to go grocery shopping.

Ψ

Andre squeezed through the front door of his apartment that afternoon with eight bulging bags of food. Since he didn't know what sort of animal he was turning into, he'd decided to be prepared. Five loaves of enriched wheat bread, the kind with oats and sunflower seeds on the crust. Fruits and vegetables: bananas, apples, cucumbers, spinach, kale, watercress, seaweed, squash. And lots of meat, since something told him there was a good chance he was going to be carnivorous. Ground beef, raw chicken, roasted chicken, pork bones. And four large packages of bacon, which he'd felt an odd attraction to as he was leaving the store. He laid out a deflated kiddy pool in the middle of the kitchen, just in case of aquatics.

It was enough to last him until Mom came back, most probably. And at least he wouldn't have to go through the humiliation of calling Nico to come feed him.

He wrestled everything into the fridge and leaned on the door until it shut. Then he tied up the plastic bags, put them in the cabinet under the sink, and went through his trash, carefully snipping up all the six-pack rings he found.

Ψ

It was 5:30 p.m. when Andre finally sat down in the cool leather of his computer chair. His desk was clear, still smelling slightly of lemony cleaning solution. He breathed a sigh of relief. Then he straightened up, woke his computer, and started AoA.

A blue-and-red splash screen invaded his screen for an instant, then:

== Welcome to Age of Absolution Online! ==

You have logged in.

Age of Absolution. It was an older game, but still Andre's game of choice.

A bulky grey rock giant named Bruhjack knelt in a patch of crabgrass in Jordvandr Steppe. The sky was a light cyan, dotted with wispy clouds that ticked forward like a clockwork postcard. The hill on which Bruhjack knelt was textured with brown-and-green mottle.

Andre admired the view. Bruhjack's big arms swung as he ran down the hill, and the world stretched out before him in panorama. Hills extended into the distance. Every now and then, tufts of pixelated grass ruffled in the wind. White tigers roamed the steppe, executing their wandering routines just as they always had, sometimes tilting crazily over the ruins of stone huts. Everything around him was peaceful.

This is what normality is, thought Andre. The media loved to portray online gamers as addicted, socially-inept freaks, but that wasn't it at all. For Andre, AoA was just a place where everybody understood the rules. A place where personal boundaries were respected and intelligence was rewarded. Sometimes he just felt like all he wanted out of reality was a place like Jordvandr Steppe, where life was simple and things moved forward with purposeful routine.

In reality, you could wake up any day and find yourself turning into an animal.

This was his online life. And it had structure. It had privacy. It had —

Saamx>> there you are!

Saamx>> we were wondering if you'd log in at all today ;)

Andre felt a smile form on his lips. "Hey Saam," he typed. "I was caught up with something annoying all day."

Saamx>> ahh…that's too bad.

Saamx>> officially, I have to warn you that the rest of your night is likely to be filled with annoyance as well, if you don't join us in New Aldeum in the next five minutes :)

Saamx>> come on, we've got things to do!

"Okay, okay." Andre stopped his character and started a teleport spell. Saamx and his wife Pinky were two of his best friends in the game. It was impossible to count the number of times they had adventured together, failing or succeeding based on the strength of their teamwork. Some nights they simply sat in a tight triangle and chatted. They even had dinner in real life a couple times, years after they had grown accustomed to seeing each other's names on their friend lists.

He liked Saam and Pinky. Strictly speaking, there hadn't been much to do in the game since the last major update three years ago. After ten years, AoA was finally starting to show its age. But Saam and Pinky made everything fresh. They made the mundane exciting again.

As Bruhjack's teleport spell finished, Andre closed his eyes and tried to ignore the dull, throbbing ache in his jaw.

Ψ

The next morning, big, brown eyes blinked back at Andre in the mirror. Long lashes. A pronounced—yes, a pronounced snout. No wonder it had felt like his face was stretching open. He raised his hand and fiddled with the inch-long whiskers that had sprouted from his moustache. The tingly feeling was stronger. His ears were large, with pointy tips. His nose was beyond recognition now, darker and flatter, with tiny surface bumps. When he ran his finger over it, he nearly jerked back from the intensity of the odors that assaulted him. There was sweat, and salt, and kale, and food wax. There was plastic and lemon oil and cleaning fluid.

A dog. He was turning into a dog. He looked down at the text message Mom had sent him, early in the morning.

Communed Gran's spirit at Circe Temple today. Don't know who hexed you.

It was odd—Granny Delphine usually kept a close eye on family matters, despite the fact that she had passed away nearly two years ago. As one of the most powerful magicians in the world, she usually knew things like who was hexing whom.

Whatever. Granny Delphine had always frowned on his decision to abandon magic. In life, she had been a fickle, hateful, unpleasant old lady—as far as Andre knew, she had *started* the whole tradition of hexing Andre when she cast a fumbling charm on him at Christmas dinner twenty years ago. She probably knew exactly who it was, and wasn't saying.

And now he was turning into a dog. He went into the kitchen,

rolled up the kiddy pool and put it away. Then he took out the knife and the cutting board, the salt and pepper and rosemary, and made himself a lunch of stir-fried beef and broccoli, with a healthy side of bacon. After he washed the dishes, he knotted an old sweater to the fridge door and rearranged the food inside so that the meat products were at the bottom.

He took two Tylenol to help with the aches and built himself a makeshift staircase up to the sink with a stool and some old computer cases. While he was moving the stool, he noticed that his thumbs felt sort of stiff.

Then he sprawled out on the couch. He was pretty accustomed to making accommodations for strange hexes in his life, but his preparations had still taken most of the day. The sky was already darkening outside, and it was starting to snow. He rested his head on a cushion and pulled his legs up onto the couch, tucking them underneath him.

The apartment was quiet except for the hum of the refrigerator. He was tired, and his body was starting to hurt all over; the pain chewed at him despite the Tylenols. His bones felt like they were shrinking, and his body seemed very unhappy about that. “Don’t go,” said his body, aching. “Don’t go.”

How could anyone hope to live a normal life like this? Aside from hexes, AoA, and his on-and-off temp job at the school board, Andre’s life was empty. He hadn’t gone on a date since he was eighteen, when Nico accidentally turned his first girlfriend’s hair into snakes and then permanently erased her memory to avoid getting in trouble. Since then, he’d had no one else in his life. No intimate other. Not for him.

He was lonely, and there seemed to be no way out of it. Could he ever wish his hex-filled life upon someone else? Could he ask someone to deal with him contracting sneezing curses and toad hexes twice a month?

He’d turned 37 this year.

He slid off the couch and padded to his bedroom. Maybe he’d be able to get some sleep if he propped himself up in bed. It felt like his ribs were shrinking, but his lungs wanted to stay the same size. He lay against a pillow, breathing hard.

Eventually he ended up lying on the floor, in the dark space between the foot of his bed and the dresser. It felt more comfortable than the bed, somehow. Safer.

Ψ

He woke with a start, as if he had caught himself falling. The pain hit him all at once: like someone was sticking hot needles in his toes, his

armpits, his eyes.

He glanced at the clock—12:30 a.m. Snow wafted down outside.

Dammit. It was going to take a miracle for him to fall back asleep. He didn't want to take any more drugs, either, because he was pretty sure the dosage was meant for humans.

He stood, shakily, and went to his computer. Anything to get his mind somewhere else.

Click. Click. Double-click. A red-and-blue splash.

== Welcome to Age of Absolution Online! ==

You have logged in.

His computer chair seemed to have grown taller. It took him a second to remember where he was in the game.

Pinky>> Bruh!

He brightened. At least Saam and Pinky were still awake.

"Hi," he managed. It was difficult to type; his fingers kept hitting the wrong keys.

Pinky>> We were just about to call it a night, actually. How are you?

"Actually, I'm not feeling too good."

Pinky>> Everything ok?

"Yeah….Just hasn't been the best day."

Pinky didn't respond right away.

Andre stood Bruhjack up and ran him around in circles, jumping repeatedly. The distraction wasn't working. His body was stretching, shrinking, and hurting.

Pinky has invited you to join a party.

Pinky would like to summon you to The Forever Grove.

Pinky>> Want to just hang out for a while and chat, then?

Andre felt a warm thrill of gratitude. He looked at the screen, then down at his arms, which seemed to be sprouting a forest of fine brown hairs. Sometimes he just wanted to escape from his stupid cursed life and go somewhere else.

You have joined the party.

Ψ

When Saam and Pinky logged out, Andre curled back up in his spot at the base of the bed and tried to get some sleep. It was 2:30.

He tried again at 4:00, 4:45, and 6:20, and gave up at 7:00. The birds outside were unnaturally loud. He discovered he could swivel his ears to muffle the sound, but it wasn't enough to let him sleep. Nor was covering his ears with his hands. He still had hands. Sort of.

At 7:15, he noticed that everything in the room seemed substantially bigger. He looked from his bed to his dresser to the doorway, which now looked appropriate for Wonderland.

He stood up, stretched, yawned, tried to take a step, and collapsed. Aside from the disorientation, however, Andre felt very little pain. His legs were long and reedy, almost absurdly thin. Brown fur covered pale, stretchy skin. It felt strange, touching it with his hands, knowing that the legs were *his*. His feet were withered away into near-nothingness—he could have fit one through a toilet paper roll. His arms, too, were covered in fine brown hairs. His fingers had shortened considerably and his thumbs seemed fused to his palms.

He stood on his legs and arms and walked slowly to the chair, as a trial. Left leg, left arm, then right leg, right arm. That seemed to work. Left, left, right, right. Left left right right. It was like canoeing. He turned around in a circle. Not too bad. He caught a glimpse of his tail, brown and bushy as a feather duster. He seemed to have very little control over it; it moved and oscillated entirely on its own. He spent a couple minutes turning and trying to get a better look at it before he realized what he must look like.

Once he got the hang of walking, it was easy to go faster. He cantered comfortably around the room, then accelerated into a flat out run. He tore through the doorway into the living room, leapt up on the sofa and off again, looped around in a big circle in front of the TV, and rushed back into his room.

His heart pounded. The sensation was…exhilarating. He felt tireless. The pain of the transformation was mostly gone, and nothing could hurt him!

He looked around the room, panting.

And he saw himself in the mirror.

He padded up to it, cautiously.

The dog that looked back at him was almost unrecognizable as having once been human.

He'd known he was smaller, but seeing his head only two feet off the ground was a bit of a shock. His ears had migrated to the top of his head, and stood there like two brown paper triangles. He wiggled

them, turned them left and right like radar dishes. His snout was short and foxlike, with long white whiskers. His eyes were big, brown, and lustrous, like a cow's. Tufts of human hair still clung to his face—he shook, and they went flying.

Looking at himself in the mirror was a bit of a strain on his eyes, so after a while he padded back towards the kitchen. He pulled on the sweater he'd tied to the fridge and eased the door open. Using his teeth to hold things felt natural, as if it were some joyous instinct he'd been trained to repress all his human life. A flood of smells poured out: apples, bacon, blood, wine, rust, meat, mold.

He pulled on a bag of red apples, the smell of plastic strong in his nose. Apples tumbled out onto the kitchen floor, rolling everywhere.

He spent some time gnawing at an apple, trying to gain purchase on its waxy surface. The taste was intensely satisfying, sour and deliciously sweet. He ate the entire apple, including the core.

He was tugging at the package of bacon, trying to dislodge it from between the milk and a six-pack of Coke when someone banged on his front door, three sharp knocks.

The hair stood up all along his back and the back of his neck. He could smell the person outside the door: it was a smell like cigarettes and leather, intensely familiar. His lips tightened. His breaths made a soft *grrrr* sound.

Knock knock knock.

He'd forgotten to set up a system for himself to open the front door. Ugh! How stupid could he get?

While he was berating himself, he heard the sound of a key entering the lock, then the *click* of the bolt disengaging.

The door opened. Nico stood there in his leather jacket.

"Andre?"

Ψ

His brother was tall, bigger than Andre remembered. His hair was mostly shaved, except for a wide strip that ran from his forehead all the way to the base of his skull. He had a tough-but-deflated look, with eyes like a basset hound's. Ten years ago, people would have crossed the street to avoid him. Now Andre imagined they just snorted at him as he passed.

He shut the door behind him. "Andre. That you?"

Andre narrowed his eyes. "Of course it's me," he growled. "What are you doing here?"

Nico looked annoyed. "Mom communed with Gran's spirit again at the Temple of Circe. Gran acted strange, and now Mom's almost sure that it was Gran herself that put the hex on you. A beyond-the-grave curse."

"What?" growled Andre. "Are you serious?" A beyond-the-grave curse was nothing to be trifled with. It was one of the most powerful spells a magician could cast. You had to give up part of your soul for it.

Nico shrugged. "None of *my* business." His eyes traced the kitchen floor, where apples and half a pack of bacon lay. "Anyway, Mom says we need to do the counterspell right away. So I'm here."

Andre's teeth were still bared. But he grudgingly admitted that Mom was right. With that much power behind a transformation spell, he could be stuck in a dog's body forever.

"I have to say, though, you don't look nearly so self-righteous in this form." Nico rummaged in his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and lit it. "It's a definite improvement."

"Nico…." It was more growl than word.

"Let's just get this over with. You got distilled water?"

"I've got Arrowhead."

"Whatever." He pulled a five-gallon jug from its place beside the fridge, not struggling with it nearly as much as Andre hoped. He took a pot from Andre's kitchen rack, inspected the inside, put it back, and picked up another one. He started heating some water on the stove. "God," he said. "Why would you want to live a life without magic? Boiling water by hand."

Andre's face felt hot. "Some of us want to make something more of our lives."

Nico choked out a laugh. "And how's that working out for you?"

He could feel the old anger at Nico building up again. Nico, who had never apologized for what he did. Who seemed incapable of remorse. Who was arrogant, crude, and mean as a snake.

Nico fished a packet of herbs from his jacket pocket. "You're not still mad at me, are you? It's been like twenty years."

Andre's hackles were tensed. "No. No, I'm not still mad at you for that. But I hope you feel bad for what you did."

"What did I do? Just a bit of memory modification. She was fine after that. Just forgot who you were. Could happen to anyone." He grinned his most infuriating grin. "Pity, though. She was a piece."

Andre's body reacted on its own. His whole face burned and itched and he chomped down on Nico's leg, hard. He tasted the iron of blood.

"*AAAH!*" The packet of herbs bounced off Andre's head, scattering twigs and dried flowers everywhere. "Get off me!" He shook his leg violently. "I swear, Andre—"

Nico jerked his leg so hard that Andre lost his grip. He skidded across the linoleum, hitting his head on a cupboard.

"Unfrickinbelievable," Nico said, inspecting his pant leg. "You can

go and unhex yourself, asshole."

"Good!" barked Andre. "Get out!"

"*Out!*" he shouted, long after Nico had slammed the door behind him. "*Out! Out! Out!*"

Ψ

He had a hell of a time turning the stove off. In the end, he had to push parts of his self-made staircase away from the sink area and over to the stove, where a careful nudge twisted the gas knob. It had taken the greater part of the afternoon.

Good. Now at least the building wouldn't burn to the ground. This is why dogs should be allowed in apartments, he thought bitterly.

He retreated to the dark space under his bed, curling up on himself. He had acted rashly, he knew. He'd been angry, true, but he probably shouldn't have bitten Nico so hard. Maybe the dog transformation was affecting more than his body.

He didn't even have a way to set things straight. In a flash, he realized how precarious his life had been up till now, wholly dependent on Mom and Nico to provide the counterspells that he should have been able to do himself. He was a real disgrace, a magic-born who didn't even know the nine basic counter-hexes.

No wonder Gran had wanted to turn him into a dog.

He sat there, processing that, for a long time.

He only came out when the smell of bacon called to him from the kitchen floor.

Ψ

After he finished the bacon, licking the plastic clean of all its delicious juices, he went back to his room. He was having trouble concentrating. He knew that being permanently transformed into a dog was a bad thing, but he couldn't force himself to be serious about it. There was too much joy to be found in moving around the house.

He hopped from the chair to the table, and picked up the phone. He laid it on the table, and with great difficulty, speed-dialed the number of his supervisor at the school board.

"Hi Nancy," he said, when the answering machine told him to leave a message. "This is Andre Papakostas, one of your temps. I've got to leave the country on short notice to attend to a family emergency, and I won't be back for a while. I'll give you a call when I get back, alright?"

He hoped his voice would be understandable.

"It's been a real pleasure working with you all these years," he added, as an afterthought. "You're an intelligent, capable woman,

and you shouldn't let Ms. McHenley boss you around."

He pressed the red button with his paw and hung up.

Then he went online to cancel his magazine subscriptions.

Ψ

He was glad Pinky and Saam were offline when he mailed them all of Bruhjack's gold and expensive gear. It was like writing them a suicide note, he mused, the melancholy coursing through his body like poison. They'd go berserk when they found out. But he hoped they would enjoy the gifts.

He ran Bruh to his favorite place in the game, a beautiful cliff overlooking a gaping chasm. At the bottom of the chasm, if you took the time to stop and angle your camera down, was a river, sparkling in the evening light.

He moved Bruh next to a cactus plant with a red flower. He was wearing his level 1 gear, like when he had first started the game.

"/", "s", "i", "t", typed Andre, prodding semi-successfully at the keyboard with his toe pads. "/sit."

Bruhjack sat.

Andre took in the scene for a few minutes.

You have logged out.

Ψ

He peed and pooped in the bathtub, because that made the most sense. He portioned out his food carefully to last for the next eight days, holding back the urge to eat it all right away. He couldn't help finishing the second pack of bacon, though. It tasted as amazing as it smelled.

He drank from the sink, having moved his staircase back over the course of another afternoon. He raced around the house for the heck of it. He lay in the sunlight in the morning when it streamed in through the window and made a bright rectangle on the couch. He chewed up all his own shoes, enjoying the irony.

The phone rang several times a day. Maybe it was Mom, or maybe it was someone else. But he no longer had the paw-eye coordination to pick up, and on the fourth day he accidentally knocked the receiver off the unit, silencing it completely.

He lost the ability to speak. He'd had the bright idea to try and voice-dial Mom, but his "Mom" was a sound halfway between a bark and a whine. For eight hours straight the voice dial feature asked him to please try again.

He didn't pay much attention to the date, but it occurred to him

one afternoon that it must be Christmas. He ate an entire squash in celebration.

On the twenty-sixth, he lay by the door, head down, tail moving, and waited for Mom. The kitchen was strewn with kale leaves and breadcrumbs and banana peels, and there were green streaks on the linoleum where he'd mashed spinach. The bathroom floor was full of disgusting yellow footprints.

Around noon, his ears perked up. Muffled voices in the hall outside. Footsteps heavy with intent. Soft knocking at the door.

"It's unlocked," he tried to say. It came out as a yawn.

The door creaked open, and it wasn't Mom.

A slightly chubby bald head poked in and looked around. "Hello?" he said. The voice had a nervous quality to it. "Umm…Bruhjack?"

Ψ

They walked around the apartment calling his name, the bald one and a tall, thin girl—the couple that he had known as Saamx and Pinky. He followed them from the bedroom to the bathroom and back to the kitchen. Their voices were blurry, garbled, as if his new dog brain couldn't quite process the sounds.

"Bruhjack?" Saam called one last time.

They looked at each other. Pinky shrugged.

Andre followed them out of the house. Pinky knelt in the hall to run her fingers through his fur, sending tingles up his spine. His tail wagged. *It's me*, he wanted to say. *Your friend.*

When they got to the car, Saam scooped him up and put him in the back seat. He closed the door. The car smelled of warm leather and paper.

Andre wasn't worried. He was among friends.

"I can't understand it," mumbled Pinky, when they were on their way.

"Me neither," said Saam. He sounded like he had a mouth full of syrup. "It looks like he's been gone for *days*."

"And he left his poor puppy. I knew it was a bad sign when he mailed us all his gear. Do you think something really happened to him?"

Saam turned the steering wheel. Andre felt the crunch of gravel as they came to a stop in front of the police station. "If anyone knows, the police do. Let's see if there's a missing person report out for him yet."

A whiff of sunshine, tarmac, and cut grass entered the car as Saam stepped out.

"I'll wait here with the puppy," said Pinky. "Call me if you need me."

Andre sat in silence for a while, staring at the trees outside the window. It was the most curious sensation, tracking the motion of wind but not its flavor.

Pinky turned to the back seat. Andre felt his ears prick up.

"We'll find your master. Don't worry." She leaned over and scratched him behind his ears. "Don't worry." He could hear the emotion, thick in her voice. Her posture was tense and melancholy.

Andre stood up and picked his way to the front of the car. He settled in a comfortable spot in Pinky's lap.

There was a subtle change in the air, a certain strange *something* that hovered right on the edge of his sharp senses. A feeling that tickled his nose and drew his ears upright. A whiff of seabreeze. The echo of a voice.

"Hmm?" said Pinky. "What is it, puppy?"

Granny Delphine whispered in his ear, soft as the sound of sunlight on the dash. His hackles rose instinctively, but her voice was not harsh. It carried regret. A deep regret, like the smell of wet oats.

Her presence was warm and familiar to him. She was no longer the overbearing tyrant she had been in life. She smelled like childhood, like a tired mother, apologetic and yet satisfied. Like someone who had just spent a piece of themselves to set a little portion of the world right.

"Merry Christmas, my grandson," she whispered, and vanished.

Andre curled up in Pinky's lap, nose under tail. She petted him with both hands.

"What a good dog you are. You just want to be petted, don't you? You've got a good life, don't you?"

The sun warmed his ears. Pinky's lap was soft and smelled of blueberries.

Andre exhaled, enjoying the feeling.

Re: Christmas, Bainbridge Island

Dennis Y. Ginoza

Prof. Kim,

As you must be aware, I have never consented to an interview nor publicly spoken about my life on Bainbridge Island. I was twelve when the island fell, and my memories of those troubled times are ultimately the personal memories of a young girl, memories I've always feared might be diminished if examined too closely or at too great a length.

It will also not surprise you that I am especially reluctant to discuss my childhood with persons of Korean descent. This is not the product of racial animosity but rather its opposite—while I am not ashamed of my past (shame necessarily requiring personal culpability), I am keenly aware of the pain that it can evoke. I've lived in Nuevo California for sixty years, Prof. Kim, yet as I have learned to my sorrow, there are some wounds that simply cannot be mended by time or distance.

Nevertheless, as this lengthy reply demonstrates, I find myself unable to dismiss your email. Perhaps your contacting me at this particular time in my life is providential. Whether it is the approaching 60th Anniversary of the December Revolution or merely the onset of old age, of late I've grown increasingly preoccupied with memories of Bainbridge Island, at odd moments becoming utterly absorbed in old recollections, fragmentary memories stripped of context like bright tiles fallen away from their mosaic: the sing-song drone of my schoolmates as we recited the Oath, the taste of barley bread and early strawberries, the adaptive fabric of Dad's tunic shifting from light to dark as a cloud passed overhead. (Memory is such a strange, unreliable thing, isn't it? When I think of my father, I always see him as he was on the island—in his smart uniform with his cap rakishly tilted, his boots gleaming, freshly shaved and smelling of bay rum tonic—rather than the broken thing he became in his last years.)

Mostly, though, I think of my friend Carol. Just today, while tending my allotment at the hydro-tower, I suddenly recalled a winter evening when the two of us had walked along the esplanade

at Eagle Bay. The sky was clear and the moon was full and I could just make out the skyline of Seattle across the Sound, the unlit cityscape flat and angular in the dim moonlight. Carol was crying (I don't remember why), and I was doing my best to console her, even as her sobs exasperated me. "Somebody told," she kept repeating, her voice tiny and forlorn. A transport barge was edging into the bay (refugees were always transported at night), its lights illuminating the dark waters. I pointed it out to Carol, but the sight only made her cry harder. A small moment, entirely unbidden, but the memory was so vivid—I can feel her small hand in mine, I can smell salt water and wood smoke, hear waves lapping the shore. (I know these are not the recollections you had hoped to elicit, Prof. Kim. I plead guilty to rambling, among other eccentricities of the elderly, and ask your indulgence.)

So, our last Christmas on Bainbridge Island.

It began as it always did, with a week of austerity. For seven days everyone ate in the enlisted men's mess halls, our meals consisting of soy nuggets and barley bread and pitchers of distilled water. Everyone took shifts at the common gardens or the docks or the SAM batteries, and each night we'd all gather on the esplanade for an open-air service (that last year, I remember, was marked by frozen rain and wind gusts that churned the water of Eagle Bay to froth). The sermon was always the same, an exhortation to remember the history of our young nation—the fraternal violence of secession, the Korean *jaenan* and the two years when ash clouds blotted out the sun, the horrors that followed. It was a miserable seven days but it was a shared misery, one that welded our island community together and reminded us of the desperate times we had only recently emerged from.

Austerity week would culminate in a somber Christmas dinner and the passing around of the traditional presents (a round of 5.56 mm ammunition, a roll of gauze bandages, a steel spoon) as well as small personal gifts.

That last Christmas was very different, of course. We islanders were good at keeping secrets, but all week there had been a kind of barely suppressed mania in the air—we could all feel it, though no one spoke of it, especially to the children. Because of my father's position on the island, however, certain details inevitably made themselves known to me.

"The Colonel and his wife are coming."

It was a few days before Christmas. Carol and I were being naughty, skipping our shift at the common garden to spend the day playing in her parents' bedroom, going through her mother's drawers and dressing in her things.

"Are you sure?"

"I heard my dad talking about it. He'll arrive on Christmas morning."

"Like Santa Claus!" Carol was sitting on her parents' bed, dabbing her neck with a bottle of rosewater she'd found in a closet. I was rooting through a nightstand hoping to locate her father's hip flask of whiskey. We'd found a shoebox under the bed, but inside was nothing but old paper maps, passports, a few gold coins from Nuevo California.

"There's going to be a formal banquet, too. And dancing."

"Maybe Jacob will ask you to dance!"

Jacob Kennedy was a year older than us. He was very handsome.

"Maybe," I said.

"You're blushing!"

"I am not!"

"But you do like him. I see you looking at him all the time in class."

I nodded. I did like Jacob. I liked him very much. The thought of dancing with him made my stomach do flips.

Carol was grinning. She set aside the perfume and leaned close to me. "Sera?"

"What?"

I thought she was going to tell me a secret. Instead, she tapped my forehead.

"Bink!"

I raised my arms in front of me like the Frankenstein monster and groaned, "What does Master want?"

"Brush my hair." I did as I was commanded. We were still playing Bink when Carol's mother came home and gave us a scolding. (I realize how awful our little game seems in retrospect, Prof. Kim, but there was no malice in what we did. As children, we had always been taught that the Korean labor battalions had volunteered to be chipped.)

The next three days seemed to pass in slow motion. Everyone knew what was happening but no one spoke about it, at least not in public. Instead we carried on with our daily lives, each person attending to their duties. Dad was spending most of his time in Seattle, so it fell to my mother to see to all the arrangements. With the help of the officers' wives and some enlisted men, she soon had Blue House scrubbed and polished to a high shine.

On the morning of Christmas Eve, crowds gathered on the esplanade to watch the Colonel's yacht arrive from his base in Olympia. The storm had broken and the sky was bright. I was surprised and a bit disappointed to see that the yacht was a modest thing with just a single cannon, though it bristled with antennae and satellite dishes. Two armored tugs and a dozen swift boats escorted it

to Seattle where my father was waiting to give the Colonel a tour of the city.

Dad came home late that night, long after the meal and sharing of presents. I awoke to the sound of my parents talking downstairs. I couldn't make out the words, but by the tone of their voices—my mother's urgent, my father's resigned—it sounded like they were arguing.

After a long time, Dad came upstairs to see me. He was very tired, almost staggering as he came into my bedroom.

"The Colonel wanted you to have this."

He gave me a small box of candied pineapple wedges. Even in the dim light, the crystallized sugar sparkled like bits of ice.

"And this is from us." A wan smile creased his face as he handed me a second box. Inside were a pair of silk ballet slippers, white with pink lacing. Carol and I had been hounding our parents for ballet slippers ever since we'd downloaded an old vid of Swan Lake.

"Thank you, Daddy." I hugged him tightly. He smelled of bay rum and sweat and something like sulfur. The stubble on his chin tickled my forehead.

"Merry Christmas, love. Try them on." As I was taking off my house socks, I noticed my mother standing in the doorway. Her eyes were red and shiny, almost as if she had been crying. She tried to smile as I did a clumsy pirouette, but I could see the strain on her face.

"Daddy got a promotion," my mother said. "Show her your star, Frank."

"Corry," warned my father. His voice was low and angry.

"The Colonel named him Central Planner of Cascadia," my mother went on. Her words were slurred and I realized that she had been drinking. "Daddy is now in charge of…well, everything. Isn't that so, dear? Everything we do, everything we *have* done. Even the Labor Processing Center. You are responsible for the chip—"

Dad grabbed my mother's arm and pulled her close. He whispered angrily into her ear, but she only shook her head.

"You are responsible," she repeated.

My father pulled her from my bedroom, slamming the door behind him. I was shaken by all this—my parents rarely fought. Hours later, when I finally drifted off to sleep, I could still hear them arguing downstairs.

The next morning the entire island gathered downtown, this time to cheer as the Colonel's yacht, now coming from Seattle, entered Eagle Bay. There was an armored SUV waiting by the docks but the Colonel and his wife chose to walk the three blocks to Blue House. They waved to the people that lined the street, shaking hands and kissing babies. Their guards seemed flustered by the press of people

but there was no reason to worry—everyone loved Colonel Herrick and his wife Margaret.

Carol and I had been told to wait at Carol's house until dinner. We spent the day nibbling on cookies and braiding each other's hair. I let Carol put on my ballet slippers and she danced a silly dance for me. There was a Chinese character inked on the insole of the slippers—it was probably just the manufacturer's name but to us it was a marvel, an ideogram come from so far away.

Carol's mother helped us get dressed in our best aramid gowns. Carol's was pale lavender, mine a dark green. We dabbed rosewater on each other's earlobes and dusted our cheeks with a hint of rouge. Carol's mother had an officer's wife take a picture of the three of us sitting together, glasses of wine raised in a toast (it became a rather famous picture after everything fell apart, used on the cover of a popular flimsy titled "The Excesses of the Old Regime").

At 5:00, we made our way to Blue House. My home had been transformed into a strange mix of mansion and barracks, with armed guards standing at attention beside electric braziers and ornately fluted columns (the columns were actually electronic jammers of some sort, but I didn't know that then). We were searched and scanned several times before being allowed through the gates.

Almost a hundred guests milled about the yard, officers' families mostly but also some enlisted men's. The vid-skin that covered the inside of the garden walls showed scenes of tulip fields, artful arrangements of tulips in vases, tulips blooming in slow motion (the Colonel's wife loved tulips). Tinsel and strings of LED lights garlanded the trees that edged the yard. From the balcony outside my parents' bedroom hung a huge Cascadian flag illuminated by two spotlights.

Mother brought us cups of punch, warning us not to spill them on our dresses. She looked stunning in a blue gown of aramid and nylon, but her face was pale and her lips were compressed into a bloodless crease. She left before we had even tasted our drinks.

Carol tugged on my sleeve. "There's Jacob," she whispered.

Jacob was standing with a group of boys, all of them dressed in their Youth Battalion uniforms. Jacob saw the two of us staring and gave a salute.

"He likes you," whispered Carol. I barely heard her, my heart was so loud in my ears.

A chime sounded, and the guards escorted us into Blue House. All of our family's furniture had been cleared away and replaced with two long rows of dining tables covered in white tablecloths and matching napkins. Polished silverware and settings of bone china and crystal goblets gleamed in the warm illumination of a dozen hanging LED lanterns. The centerpieces were, I was proud to note, bowls of

apples from our garden along with platters of barley bread and margarine and jars of strawberry preserves.

Carol and I were giggling about Jacob and his uniform when the hum of conversation stopped abruptly. Everyone turned their attention to a low platform that had been placed near the central stairway. A man in a dark suit sat on the platform, his head bent as he plucked at the strings of his cello.

"That's him," Carol said, clutching at my arm. "That's Jeong."

Jeong Sin-Jo was a short man, thin and slightly stooped, his hair tied back in a neat ponytail. A famous musician before the *jaenan*, he'd been part of the first wave of refugees to enter Cascadia after the nuclear exchange between North and South Korea. Taken from the refugee camp in New Tacoma, Jeong had served as the Colonel's personal assistant for over twelve years.

After several minutes of plucking, Jeong took up his bow and began to play the Colonel's favorite piece, Bach's Cello Suite #1 in G. Jeong had never been chipped—his fine motor skills were intact and he was fully self-aware—and it was fascinating to see how he lost himself in the music, his face a study in concentrated joy, his hands lithe and vibrant and strong. As Jeong played, the Colonel and his wife descended the central staircase hand in hand.

Today their faces are familiar from so many holos and vids, but nothing can truly replicate the sensation of being near them, in the flesh, the Colonel with his handsome face and sad eyes, his wife so pale and elegant. I still remember the dress she was wearing, a sheath of reactive silk that shimmered and shifted like moonlight on water. What struck me most was how the Colonel rested his hand on the small of her back. Such a small gesture, yet it made my heart ache to see it.

The two of them made their way through the admiring crowd. Their gestures were languid, their smiles comforting. Everyone they spoke to seemed dizzied by their presence. It was as if a field surrounded them both, electrifying all who drew near.

As the Colonel was talking with my father, his wife approached Carol and me. Margaret Herrick was in her fifties, but she looked much younger. Her hair gleamed like polished copper and freckles dusted the bridge of her nose. When she smiled, I saw the famous gap between her front teeth. She smelled of lilacs and rain.

"Aren't you two so pretty," she said.

Carol and I thanked her, both of us blushing.

Margaret Herrick moved on to greet an enlisted man and his plump wife. The two of us watched her cross the room to rejoin her husband, the two of them taking seats at the center of the dining tables.

That final Christmas meal was a wonder. Trade negotiations with

Canada had been concluded the month before, and we were served platter after platter of roast turkeys, smoked hams, oysters, stuffed duck, and baked salmon. The thing that most delighted us (the adults as well, though they tried not to show it) was the dessert—a thick slab of milk chocolate for each of us. I have eaten it many times since, Prof. Kim, but I've never matched the bliss of that first taste of chocolate, real chocolate.

To my disappointment, there was to be no dancing. Instead, after we had stuffed ourselves, the Colonel and his wife led us on a "forced march" down to the esplanade. It was a crisp, clear night and the walk to the shore was cheerful, children skipping and shouting as our parents smoked cigars (something I had never seen before) and passed around bottles of Canadian whiskey. We arrived to find that electric braziers and LED torches had been placed along the length of the esplanade and a small platform erected at its center. The Colonel mounted this platform and, after a small bow to the milling crowd, directed all of us to look across the water.

Carol and I were leaning over a railing. Long minutes passed, and I was about to whisper to Carol about Jacob stealing glances at us when the far shore suddenly bloomed with color.

It took a moment before any of us realized what we were seeing, then cheers erupted up and down the esplanade, rising with such a fervor that it frightened me, if only for a few moments. People were hugging and clapping each other on the back while others simply stared, too awed by the relit Seattle skyline to make a sound.

I ran to my father and threw myself into his arms.

"Daddy!" I screamed. "You did it, you did it!"

Mother stood apart from the two of us, watching our celebration. She wore a bright smile, but I could tell she wasn't happy. Even surrounded by so many people, she seemed alone and afraid. Her attitude frustrated me—how power was restored to Seattle is now a matter of outrage, but at the time it was the most wondrous thing any of us had seen, especially the children. Even today, knowing what I know, I still look back on that moment with exhilaration.

Sadly, the night ended on a sour note for me. After hugging my father, I went looking for Carol. I found her at the edge of the esplanade. She was holding hands with Jacob, the two of them grinning shyly at one another. It shames me to say it, but even after so many decades, I can still recall the shock I felt—like a kick in the belly, a sharp pain and a rising nausea. Although she was my closest friend on the island, in that moment I would have been quite pleased to see Carol dead. (It would be easy to dismiss this as childish and fleeting, Prof. Kim, but I have always believed that children feel betrayal more deeply than adults.)

Despite this last incident, I will always remember that final

Christmas as a remarkably optimistic time on Bainbridge Island. Our bellies were full and the island was celebrating and the war, so we believed, would soon be won. When the Colonel's yacht left Eagle Bay the next morning, the lights were still on in Seattle. We all thought they'd never go out again.

The rest you know, Prof. Kim. In the days that followed, events began to accelerate. The siege of Portland, the State House massacre, the mass unchipping of the Korean labor battalions—I am no historian and have little to add to what is already known.

After Colonel Herrick was assassinated by Jeong Sin-Jo, Bainbridge Island became a prison, our lives constrained by rumor and fear. Carol's family was one of several that were purged by my father after evidence was found that they were planning to flee the island for Nuevo California.

The rest of us hung on as well as we could, but by the end of March we all knew the war was lost, the dream of a reborn Cascadia finished. When we finally abandoned the island, we did not need flashlights to light our way—across the water Seattle was burning, the flames far brighter than the electric lights that had once illuminated the city.

I thought I'd never see Carol again, but I was wrong. During my father's trial, I glimpsed her sitting in the audience. The camera did not linger on her face, but in the brief moment she appeared onscreen, I saw her smiling. I was moved that she could still feel so warmly towards my father after all that her family had suffered. I saw her again when my father was hanged, but Carol's back was to me and I could not see her face. I later learned that she had been allowed to remain in Cascadia, eventually marrying a factory worker and having several children. It is good to know that she has endured.

As for me, life in my adopted nation has been as much as I could hope for. Anonymity has been my balm these last six decades, and I have always zealously guarded my privacy, at least until your email arrived.

You have asked for my thoughts about Bainbridge Island, Prof. Kim. Although I obviously regret the things that were done there, I am not ashamed to admit that I have nothing but the deepest affection for my childhood home. I've spent many hours watching the promotional vids that the new Cascadian government has published online. These tell me that the majority of the island has been turned over to the agricultural cadres, but that the waterfront and its immediate surrounds have been restored as a kind of historical site. (The processing center at the far end of the island has also been restored, but I have no desire to view vids that would cause me to revisit the horrors that occurred there.)

It's difficult to describe the pleasure I've felt seeing those places where I spent so many happy years. Blue House has been returned to its former charm, its colonnades and balconies and leaded-glass windows just as I remember.

Perhaps it will not surprise you that I have decided to buy a ticket for the train to New Tacoma. It is a long journey from San Diego, but the northern border is open and such a trip is quite feasible, even for an old woman like me. From New Tacoma it is only a short bus trip to Seattle and then a ferry crossing to my newly restored home.

I look forward to that crossing more than you can imagine, Prof. Kim. I can see myself at the railing of the ferry, watching my island grow nearer and more distinct as the distance between us diminishes. And after I have revisited all those places that I have missed so dearly —the ferry terminal, the esplanade and the marina, my childhood home—perhaps I will seek out my old friend Carol. It would be so good to see her again. I imagine us sitting together in some shady spot, telling each other of the things of our lives, the joys we have been gifted with and the sorrows we have endured in the years since our last encounter. There are so many things to be said, so many memories to share. Mostly, though, I hope to hold her hand again as we did on Bainbridge Island so many years ago, two little girls still innocent of the world beyond its shores.

The Runner of n-Vamana

Indrapramit Das

Mira lets the wired nanoswarm saturate every muscle, every neuron in her body. She has been running for four days. With sunrise in her eyes she stops, only to remind herself what not running feels like. Her augmented heart is no longer beating—it's too fast to call it that. It floats like a hummingbird in her chest. The nanoswarm works overtime as she pauses, mending the damage to her muscles and bones, using her skin to synthesize water and energy from the atmosphere and sunlight. Cryofoils embedded in her muscular planes keep her from overheating, sucking at her scorching core temperature. She is alarmed by how inhuman she feels. Four more days, and Mira will be back where she started, back at the huddled settlement of the terraforming station. Looking at the white-hot orb on the horizon, she remembers the adulation of her fellow humans. The settlers, touching her feet and hands, raising their palms to fluorescing clouds pregnant with constant change. Bright array of absorbent prayer flags perched on the settlement's crete houses, snapping in the charged nanite breeze. Voices lifting in song to the old god in the sky, planted by probes centuries ago and still in the flux of maturation: n-Vamana, nanogod that shares its name with the planetoid it shelters and grows.

Alone, n-Vamana above and below her, Mira feels artificial, built, a magnificent sculpture created by nanotechnists and surgeons out of an obsolete body. Artificial like the sun in the sky, no sun at all; a hole punctured into spacetime to flood this dim little world with the light of a distant white giant, and pull it gently into a new orbit. Artificial like the atmosphere, churned into fertility by the work of n-Vamana and the zoati, the seven icy comets driven into the planetoid before it was settled. All artifice worthy of gods. Inhuman, magic, impossible. Her heart, trying to fly out of her chest. Her lungs, breathing air that would asphyxiate an Earthling.

She reminds herself of her brother. The small, human creature that emerged from the same womb she did. Whose augments are still in infancy, growing with him. Her brother, who is an orphan like her. Their mother—dead during the voyage, unable to weather the

crushing pressures placed on the human body by the warp-points through which it slipped, by the radiation leaking past shields, by extended zero-g, by the very augments that protect younger bodies from such rigors. Their father—dead on their homeworld while his son was still gestating; crushed by an errant car on the streets of Mumbai's megapolis, cremated, ashes drifting in that atmosphere. Her brother—alive. Nine-year-old Ela, who smeared her ankles and cheekbones with terastil clay—soil from this world mixed with water from Earth, a planet he has never seen. His eyes vacant with wonder at the expanses of even this small planetoid, dizzying after a life spent on a starship. Ela had carried out the ritual as he'd been told, knowing how precious the old-water was, his small hands carefully daubing the cool mud across his sister's Earth-born bones. As Mira looked at him kneeling in front of her with his dirty palms and fingers, as if he were just playing out the impulses of childhood instead of the symbolic narrative of an entire posthuman diaspora, she saw a little boy losing his big sister. New worlds need new stories. New legends. She saw Ela witness her ritual transformation into a cybadevi, a breathing mythmeme for this new world. There was no escaping what the whole settlement felt at that moment, as Ela painted Mira's carbon-reinforced ankles in front of the chanting settlers, the flaring sky. All augmented to some degree, all in the process of cyba-meld to help them stay alive here. But none like her, none trained and modified over nine years to become this new being that might just survive its test. Of all of them, she was the least human.

She was now the Runner of n-Vamana. She was more than just Mira.

Knowing this, Mira had run her hand through Ela's short, damp hair. She had gathered it in her fist and given it a tug.

"Aoh," he whispered. A single quick syllable, universal. Pain. The pain woke him. It reminded him, perhaps, of his sister. His sister Mira. Mira, the girl who'd once teased him for being afraid of the void outside the chilly starship windows, who told him there were monsters who ate little boys out there in the dark between the stars. Mira, who had long hair then, before she cut it off, whose braids he'd watched float in the starlight of viewing ports, coiling away from her head as she read on her tablet novels written millennia ago. Mira, who held him close when he longed for a parent, helped with his lessons, taught him to grow and prepare gcel rations; who'd tethered and tucked him into his sleeping pod and told him her distant memories of a crowded Earth.

His hair in her fist. The pain made him look up, look into her eyes so she could smile at him. He smiled back. A weak smile, but a smile all the same. She could ask for no more than that, on the eve of her

run.

"Don't run away forever. Come back," Ela said.

Even with her muscles burning with energy beyond what an unaugmented human being could produce, she pressed her lips to Ela's sweaty forehead, to let him know that his sister was still there under the glow of this devi's tattoos, the flicker of glyphs across this devi's photosynthetic skin.

"Yashin ti terra, Ela," she said in the star-tongue of their vessel, now a language of n-Vamana. [I] Swear on Earth, Ela. Blue gem in the sky, fragile, waiting, birthplace, memory. Swear on Earth. Ela had nodded, convinced.

And then she ran.

She is not dead, yet. It is working. All of it. She is halfway through the test, halfway across the planetoid. She has run faster than any man or woman since humans walked, faster than machines, faster than Mercury, Hermes, Flash, Maya. This is impossible, it is madness, but she has done it. Four more days. Mira will test the limits of their augmentations, prove how far they can take humans on this little planetoid, just as the warp hole and the atmospheric nanogod sheathing the world has taken n-Vamana beyond its own provenance as a lifeless speck in the universe. In her electric limbs, she holds change itself. She is the messenger, and the message. She will prove how little food or water they will need here, how effectively they can process the changing atmosphere outside the settlement, even while pushing at the limits of the human system.

Every time she thinks: this is impossible, she thinks of Ela. Child she has raised alone in a vessel that carried them through the howling emptiness of the universe. Who can speak and write, and love, despite not having seen a world to live on till now, despite having only his sister as a guardian. She, grief-struck orphan, has somehow become a mother to her little Ela.

Impossibilities that bring her back to the ground, even as she shears the very air with her speed, slashing the crust of n-Vamana.

There is a strange vertigo that accompanies her, running on the back of this celestial dwarf, its gravity low despite a superdense core that keeps her from soaring into flight. It was, after all, chosen by her people because of its small size—easier to terraform. It is the first of its kind, to be wreathed and gifted with life-nurturing power by humans—an experimental home for the first of the cybas. At night, running by the crests of n-Vamana's low hills, she has seen past the nanogod's aurora and to the stars, the moon-blue glow of the system's actual sun, too far away to give this place its own life. To the Jovian giant Shesha, its gaseous curve burning the star-studded dark, distance turning it deceptively small, a delicate red sickle suspended in the black. And she has felt more alone than ever before,

dizzy from the sensation that she is running across a tiny rock in space, her legs barely tethered to the ground. At other times, with the galaxy crowning the night, that same loneliness has nurtured a euphoria so strong that Mira has had to slow down and linger on it, to take in a horizon empty of human life, glimmering with luminescence of burgeoning algal fields, tunnelled sunlight of the warp hole sparking off embryonic microbial oceans pooling out of the sky, to bask in the illusory sensation that she *is* n-Vamana, that she is beyond humanity, that she is this world incarnate, a deity carving its path through spacetime, aeons from the flocked and boiling Earth and its anxious worshippers who wait for distant strains of information filtering out of the cosmos. The datastreams of humanity's trembling colonization of deep space, its evolution into space-faring cyba, bolstered against an unfathomable infinity. After nearly a decade of running and training her augmentations in the confines of a starship's centrifuges, always surrounded by walls to keep the void out, running across n-Vamana feels like no freedom Mira has ever imagined. In these moments, she has become the cybadevi she is meant to be, a legend in the nascent history of this world, embodiment of n-Vamana like the dim, remote gods that gave their ancient names to the solar worlds near Earth. It has taken four sunrises, four times washed by the borrowed light of a star centuries in the past blinding her tear-shot eyes, to wake her from these trances of divinity.

E-la. Two syllables, named on Earth, spoken by a mother and father long gone. Ela. Ela. Ela. She whispers, veils of steam rising off her superheated body.

Mira is cyba, but human still.

She sees into the future, when her likeness will grace the domed ceiling of the port, immortalized in a mosaic of stone chips, their colors unlike anything Earthlings ever saw, mined from the crust her feet cling to right now. New arrivals will look up at her for generations to come, glittering above them, a new myth born on this place. Earthlings will look at their textbooks and read about her centuries from this moment, and light incense in front of shrines in her honor, smoke lilting through glowing 3D portraits of her carried in the pulsing hot dataservs of starships; they will look through their telescopes to the constellation where her memory dwells, the runner in the night sky, herald of the long awaited galactic age. The pioneer of the cybas, the runner of n-Vamana. She doesn't care that these things will happen. Rather, she actually does care about these things, but is just too wired to realize this. Right now, all Mira can see is forward motion. She wants to run, to live, to survive. She can feel the union between her body and the nanoswarm, between her colony and n-Vamana, its atmosphere seeded and transforming even as she

breathes and sweats. At this moment, what she cares about is the finish, a hemisphere away, drawing a human line across the planetoid to her little brother Ela, her fallible flesh and blood, waiting, waiting for his sister to run around the world and return to him.

The Saltwater African

Lisa Bolekaja

Bola Ogun.

Tchula Walker rolled the name on her tongue. It was a thick name. Had weight. Texture. She hadn't heard a pureblood African name in years. Purebloods fresh off the boat were a risk for slave owners, because they remembered what it was like to be free. The sweetness of it was still fresh as black strap molasses for them, and that sweetness could infect others. There were legendary stories about Africans along the Georgia coast who had escaped their bondage. Stretched out their arms and flew away. But this was Mississippi, and homegrown niggers had clipped wings.

The washerwomen were whispering about the arrival of the Saltwater African, Bola Ogun, that morning when Tchula was rubbing a poultice made of burdock root and comfrey onto her twin sister Celestine's right hand. Celestine had a boil above her left knuckle that pussed over and stunk to high heaven, seeping yellow, orange, and pinkish-red fluid. Tchula chewed up more pieces of burdock root, fished the moist pieces off her tongue and pressed them onto the infected area before wrapping it with a clean strip of cotton.

Sitting on Tchula's uneven oak table, Celestine blocked off her nose with a lavender handkerchief that was embroidered with her initials. She made a great show of it to Tchula, fluttering her hand so that the silken cloth was always within eyesight. It was a gift from their owner, Master Lyle Stewart.

The two solidly built washerwomen with sun-scorched indigo skin were heaving large baskets of laundry on top of their heads when they passed by Tchula's cabin door, clucking their tongues, giddy with excitement.

"He a big man," one woman said.

"For true. Long time since a big man walked these parts," the other said, and then they tittered, shushing themselves. Tchula's tiny splintering cabin was near the main house, and the women didn't want their laughter stirring up the Stewart household.

Celestine eyed the women outside and wiped her brow with the

handkerchief.

"You seen him yet?" she asked.

"No," Tchula answered.

"You think he knows English?" Celestine asked.

"Dunno," Tchula said. She stood up from the stool she squatted on and rubbed her hands on her dress.

"That oughta hold you. Try and keep it clean if you can. I have wash to finish."

"You're not curious?" Celestine asked.

"A slave is a slave," Tchula said.

"Not this one. He saltwater. I'm gonna see him. So are you."

Celestine grabbed her sister's hand and pulled her out of the cabin gingerly, mindful of Tchula's bad hip and limp.

The sisters went together towards the front of the spacious colonial-style house. Stewart was talking to the owner of Bola Ogun, a flinty-eyed man known as Mr. Harper. Stewart's slightly receding hairline had turned a splotchy crimson from the heat, and he had a look on his face that let the sisters know he was annoyed with Harper.

"I'm telling you, Mr. Stewart, this slave is worth every penny. He was seasoned in Barbados for the last three years. They broke him in real good down there. And he's a damn fine blacksmith. A skilled slave with a trade, and—" Harper moved over to Bola and slapped his hand on the slave's arm and chest, "—he'd make a good breeder if you want to stud him."

"Healthy?" Stewart asked.

"Got his papers right here, sir. He's a dream investment. I'd keep him myself if I could afford to. If you don't want him, Mr. Trammel over in Noxubee County wants a gander at him."

"Trammel? That hump wouldn't know what to do with a quality slave. Hand over his papers."

Harper reached into his dingy coat and pulled out a folded paper. Stewart frowned at the soiled condition of the health record, but read it anyway.

Bola stood shackled next to two tired horses and a field hand named Luther. The new arrival was dusty, and streaks of sweat striped his face. His flared nose was pointed on the end, and his eyes were slanted and deep set. His lips were puffy, almost like a woman's, and his head shaved bald.

"He's a looker, eh, Tchula? Tall and solid," Celestine said, sucking in her teeth.

"For true. Seem like he could fly off right now if he didn't have those chains—"

"What are you two doing here?" Stewart demanded.

"Tchula was helping me with my hand, Master Stewart, sir. We're

just passing through, sir. Sorry," Celestine said, linking her arm with Tchula's and moving them past the carriage.

Walking past Bola, Tchula smelled the sour stench of long travel on him. She kept her head down, but her eyes upon him. His gaze was like a gentle fondling on her cheek, and she shivered as if he had actually touched her. There was a mindfulness about him, something familiar in the way he regarded her. What impressed her most was that he didn't have the bearing of a slave. His hands and legs were shackled, but his back was straight and his head held high. Unlike her, he was primordial, undiluted and unadulterated.

And then he smiled at her.

Not with teeth, but the curling up of those abundant lips. She found herself licking her own lips, and felt as if he'd made her do that. She tasted invisible blood in her mouth. It was a vulgar display of power on his part, and she felt compelled to smile back at him. *Yes, there it is*, she thought. She knew his kind well. He was a two-headed man, and she could sense his Vodun strength spilling off in waves. He had recognized her as a two-headed woman, although she veiled this knowledge publicly.

When she and Celestine headed back around towards the kitchen, Tchula knew she would have to talk to the saltwater conjure man and ferret out his mojo. She felt like she had met her match at last.

π

Bola stood hitting iron on a fairly new anvil in the smithy barn. It was his first official day, and Stewart had asked for new horse shoes for his entire stable. Luther, the slave who had briefed Bola on the lay of the plantation, worked by his side along with a stocky young teen named Teak who chopped wood and kept the forge fires blazing. Luther wiped his mouth and glanced out of the smithy.

"Here come trouble," he said.

Bola finished pounding the iron shoe and slid it into a barrel of water. He saw one of the twins making her way to the smithy. This one didn't limp. She wasn't the one he wanted to see.

"Ain't nothing worse than them red niggers, hear me, Bola?" Luther said.

"Why?"

"That one there is Celestine. She's a cook for the house, and she sleep with the master. Watch what you say 'round her, 'cause it might get back to him if she can make it benefit herself some kinda way. The crippled one, Tchula, now she's nice and all, but she's not to be toyed with. She obeah, a black magic woman—"

"You flapping your gums, Luther?" Celestine said, fanning her face with her hand. Bola noticed she dressed nicer than the other slave

women, and she wore real shoes. Her hair was wrapped like the women he remembered back home. But the tufts of hair sticking out were thinner and straighter. She didn't look like most of the women on the plantation who had made excuses to walk past the smithy, trying to catch Bola's eye.

"Thought you'd be making Master Stewart his biscuits by now, gal," Luther said.

"He gone for the day. Now stop pestering me man, I came to talk to Bola."

"Watch yourself," Luther whispered to Bola. He left them alone.

"Teak, you can rest," Bola said. Teak nodded and headed out.

"You do know some English. I was worried we couldn't talk." His *Ibo* accent was heavy but understandable. Celestine closed the gap between them.

"I know enough," he said. Celestine inched closer.

"Good. You know something? My daddy was African too. My mama was Choctaw. You know what that is? You know what Indians are?"

"Red peoples."

Celestine laughed, a full-throated belly laugh.

"Yeah, Bola. Red people. My name is Celestine." She held out her hand.

"I hear your name is Neshoba," he said.

"It's Celestine," she said with a snap, her smile faltering.

"Careful," he said. "Iron still hot." He pushed her back from the anvil.

"I go by Celestine now. It's prettier."

"What you want, Celestine?"

"Get to know you. It's boring around here. We don't get much news about the outside world, so I thought you could talk to me about it. Not now, since you're working, but later."

"I need my rest."

"I know."

He liked looking at her. She was attractive and her voice was soothing, but there was a sharpness beneath her that he didn't care for. He'd have to be on his toes with her.

"Something wrong?" she asked, stepping close again.

It had been a long time since he had been with a woman. He was allowed to sleep in the smithy, so he would have plenty of privacy. He glanced down at her flushed cheeks and the swelling of her breasts. She was eager. It would be easy. But this was a kept woman. He wouldn't risk his life for sex. He stepped away from her, and his right arm struck the anvil, burning his flesh.

"Oh, God," Celestine said. Bola ran to the clean water bucket, and thrust his arm inside.

“I’ll go get Tchula!” Celestine yelled, running out of the smithy.

π

After wrapping his wound with cloth, Tchula made Bola drink willow bark tea in her cabin. Celestine wanted to assist, but she had a late supper to help the head cook with, so she left them alone.

Bola was surprised at how clean Tchula could keep her cabin when so many slave quarters were infested with vermin. She had a lopsided wooden table and three chairs, a lumpy pallet with faded quilts in a corner, a fireplace with a stool in front of it, and a chamber pot near the front door. There was shelving on one wall that housed various jars of dried herbs and a few plates and bowls. A black kettle sat in the fire boiling water. She stuck a ladle in the kettle to draw out some hot water to make him more tea.

“You have a man?” he asked.

“Had one. He’s dead,” she said. Her voice was firm, but still had a melancholy lilt to it. He could tell that it had happened awhile ago.

“How he die?”

“We tried to run from here and find my mother’s people. Got caught. They hung him on that Tupelo tree out there by the well.”

“And you?” he asked. Her eyes never wavered from his.

“Master tied me to that tree while my man still swinging, and had another slave beat me in front of everyone. I was pregnant. The baby didn’t live. Now I have a limp and a half tooth.”

Tchula poured the hot water into his tin cup and sat down in a chair beside him.

“I’m sad for your baby,” he said.

“I’m not. Glad it’s dead. I didn’t want to raise Master Stewart’s seed.”

They sat for a moment in silence. He drank the tea. She watched him. He regarded the room again.

“What’s that?” he said, pointing to another corner. A small checkered cloth covered something on the dirt floor near the fireplace.

“That’s how I do my real healing,” she said.

She stood and walked over to the cloth, squatted down and lifted it up. From where he sat, Bola saw bundles of dried tobacco sitting next to a pipe, a turtle shell, and several polished stones. There was also a small plate filled with dried corn near a wooden bowl filled with clear liquid. Familiar tools to him. He reached deep into his pants pocket and pulled out a small leather pouch. Tchula covered her altar and sat down next to him. He opened the leather and revealed a lock of dark curly hair tied with thread, bits of iron and other metals, along with a small tobacco leaf stained with dried blood.

“Strong medicine?” she asked.

“The strongest I know,” he said, fingering the lock of hair. He tied the pouch back up and placed it on her table. She picked it up.

“I think our gods should meet,” she said. She took his pouch and placed it on her altar next to the tobacco. She returned to her seat.

“You hungry?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said.

“I can go to the kitchen, and get you a plate of leftovers. You can wait here for me….”

“Not that kinda hungry, Tchula.”

He traced the shape of her oval face with his right index finger until it rested on her lips.

“I’ll be your man now, if you want,” he said.

“I want,” she said, taking his hand and leading him to her pallet.

π

The next morning when she awoke, Tchula found a tiny metal bird sitting on the pillow where Bola had slept. A tiny metal bird made of copper and pewter with mechanical wings that moved when the bird’s head was touched. It was half the size of her thumb.

She could smell the burning of iron and hear Teak chopping wood to keep up with Bola’s work. She stretched out on the pallet that now smelled of his musk and her own sweat. She allowed herself a small sliver of happiness, just a little bit, no bigger than a thimble. To increase its size would risk more Tupelo trees and bitter tears. She touched the bird’s head again, and watched the metal wings flutter.

π

Tchula worked with the washerwomen, boiling clothes and sheets in big iron pots at four-thirty in the morning, then beat them against brick blocks with cleaning sticks that looked like boat paddles. Their rhythmic pounding filled the air with a cacophony of sound. Some of the women clucked their tongues at her because she didn’t tie her hair up. Instead she allowed her black silken strands to blow freely, making her look younger than her twenty-four years.

At noon she took a break to eat with some friends out near the cotton fields before heading back to boil more sheets and fold up dried clothing. She saw Bola pounding iron with a hammer, creating sparks that twinkled like fireflies. Teak hovered near him, watching and learning. Moving closer to the smithy barn, Tchula noticed her sister sashaying over to Bola and Teak. Celestine carried a basket, probably with the pretense of doing an errand, Tchula thought.

Bola’s body looked relaxed. He was listening to Celestine, and then

he was back to pounding metal. Tchula saw Celestine's neck roll, and she walked away so fast that Tchula understood she was upset with Bola. Tchula knew her twin wouldn't give up until she had a taste of him. She wasn't mad at her sister. She felt sorry for her twin now that Celestine had replaced her in Stewart's bed. Because of Tchula's bad hip and broken tooth, she was damaged goods in Stewart's eyes. The last time he raped her, she was told that her raggedy teeth hurt him "down there" when he used her mouth. No man wanted either sister because of Stewart. It was the reason why Celestine was housed as a permanent cook inside the main house, away from the slave quarters and the fields.

Tchula wanted to talk to Bola. And when she arrived at the smithy he was grinning at her, rubbing his chest. Teak chopped more wood, ignoring them.

"You like my gift?" he asked.

"How you make it so life like?"

He showed her his pouch hung around his neck.

"You have to be careful with that. If Master Stewart sees that he'll get real nervous. Sell you off or worse."

He nodded and squeezed the pouch again.

"The first day you was here, you was showing off to me. You put blood in my mouth. I tasted it."

He shrugged, but her face was strained. He tucked the pouch back into his shirt.

"I don't want to see you on no tree, Bola. He won't let me live next time."

Now she made him taste blood in his mouth where there was none. She pulled out the bird from her apron.

"Can you make me something else? A turtle?" she asked.

"Whatever you want."

"Good," she said.

She wanted to kiss him, but Teak was nearby. Bola put down his tools, pulled her to the side and away from prying eyes.

Tchula knew that Celestine was none too pleased to see them like this when she returned to have another go at Bola. It was the gentleness of Bola's hand stroking Tchula's arm that knotted Celestine's stomach into a twisted mass. Paulo, Tchula's former lover, had done that often, and it frightened Celestine. It meant that Tchula cared about something other than herself. It meant that her sister would try to run again. Escape the plantation without her. Unlike Paulo, Bola was strong and healthy, not likely to slow Tchula down and get them caught. And where would that leave Celestine? Alone and further alienated from the other slaves. Tchula was her one true, faithful companion, her only blood relative. Unlike Tchula, Celestine was not a runner. She was too afraid of Master Stewart and the pain

of a whip.

Tchula watched Celestine slip away. She would have to force Celestine to run with her this time. Force the wolf back into her sister's blood.

π

There was the turtle, and then the pair of frolicking rabbits. Next was the group of pewter washerwomen beating sheets with miniature wooden paddles. Each week, when he had time, Bola shaped figurines for Tchula. Each gift strengthening their bond. They were discreet around their owner's family and the boisterous overseer during the day, but entwined their arms and legs in her cabin at night. Other slaves knew of their couplings, but said nothing. They respected Tchula but feared her, too. They needed her to tend to their cuts and heal all wounds since the nearest doctor was miles away.

The older slaves remembered her mother, Itta, the Choctaw woman who emancipated herself away from the forced Indian migration back in 1831. The Choctaw were the first ones removed, and Itta, a woman who carried strong medicine in her bones, walked away from her tribe and their own parcel of West African slaves, hauling two twin girls in her belly. There were no tears when she made her way further south, passing herself off as a tawny-skinned white woman when needed. If it came down to it, she preferred to be a slave on the land of her ancestors than be free somewhere foreign, without them.

When Itta reached the Stewart property in 1832, she had babies strapped to her front and back, and when they asked for her name, she told them "Itta, the walker." Her girls were Tchula and Neshoba Walker. The fox and the wolf. And that was that.

Despite their fears of obeah and darker forces, the slaves let Tchula be. Other women who may have gnashed their teeth for Bola gave her a wide berth.

The true fear was of their owner, who was slowly selling off small groups of slaves to cover gambling debts, poor financial planning, and the lack of a good cotton season two years in a row. Lyle Stewart liked to pass himself off as a big man, owner of the most slaves in Yazoo County, but he was hemorrhaging money at an alarming rate. He had to bring home his eldest son from a prestigious boarding school to learn the trade of overseeing the slaves in his absence, and the current overseer, Rankin, was more interested in sleeping with slave women and drinking corn liquor than teaching Junior slaving skills. The opportunity to acquire Bola had been a lucky break.

π

Word came down in late August that Stewart had made a deal to exchange Bola's labor to an owner in a New Orleans parish that was known to work slaves to death. The owner needed a skilled iron man for his shipbuilding enterprise, and in exchange for Bola's labor, Stewart would get twenty male slaves for the duration of Bola's stay. Twenty slaves that would be clothed, fed, and housed with compensation from the shipper, and not out of Stewart's pocket. Any children born on the Stewart plantation during Bola's service in New Orleans would be split between the two men and vice versa. Stewart ceded first choice to the shipper. Plans were in the works for Stewart to travel to New Orleans with Bola so both owners could sign binding legal contracts in person. They both wanted to look over their merchandise, finger the goods to make sure they were suitable for the new jobs they would undertake.

Tchula became anxious with the news of Bola's imminent departure from her life. Other slaves began to talk, and wondered how she would handle another man taken from her. She spent her days washing, healing those who needed healing, and admiring Bola's metalwork. Celestine admired them too, and one day she slipped the washerwomen figurines into her apron pocket to show the head cook, and Mrs. Stewart saw them. She demanded to know where Celestine got them from. Celestine told. Mrs. Stewart made such a fuss over them, that she took every last one she could find in Tchula's cabin and placed them in her own parlor.

Tchula was furious. She accosted Celestine in front of their mother's gravesite. Celestine was placing flowers on the headstone when Tchula pounced on her.

"You bitch!" she screamed, clawing at Celestine's arm.

"Let me go!"

"Why did you take my things? He made them for me. For my eyes only."

"I was only going to show them to Ouida."

"You should've asked me. Now she'll never give them back."

"He can make you some more—"

"There's no time for him to make that many again!"

Celestine pulled out the metal bird from her apron.

"Here, she didn't take all of them. I hid this one. I'm sorry."

Tchula took the bird from Celestine's hand.

"Maybe if you sweet talk Master Stewart, he'll let you have them back, or maybe you can come look at them—"

"I'm not like you. I can't have that man on me—" Tchula said.

"You think I like it? He only took me because you left! You did this to me. And I hear everyone whispering about you running off again. If you leave again, he'll hurt me worse."

Tchula let her eyes look towards the ground.

"I know it's bad," she said. She felt deep shame. Glancing over at their mother's grave, she also felt a deep loss. Itta had been gone for twelve years. Tchula reached down and touched the headstone.

"Yeah? Well I take it. I lay there and pretend he's doing it to someone else. It ain't fair. You get Bola, and I get that maggot's filth all in me. How many more babies you gotta shake outta my womb? If you leave, I'll have his children, and he will sell them. I'll be stuck."

"Mama didn't want this for us," Tchula said.

"She died and left us, Tchula! This how it's gonna be."

"Neshoba," Tchula said.

"Celestine. My name is Celestine."

"I can't stay here anymore."

"What about me? You would leave me here all alone?"

"You can run with me. Mama would want you to come with me—"

"No—"

"I'll die if I stay here. I know it," Tchula said.

"I'm already dead," Celestine said.

π

A week before Bola was to leave, Tchula asked him for one more metal figurine.

"My mother used to take spider webs and put them inside of cuts to bind the flesh. She liked spiders. They were good luck. Make this for me. It will remind me of you."

Within three days Bola handed Tchula the inch long metal spider. In her quarters she ran her fingers over it, marveled at the elaborate detail he put into the piece. She kissed it, and then hugged him.

"Tonight, you have to ask your gods to help me with Celestine. I'm not strong enough to do it alone," she said.

"She has no faith; it won't work," he said.

"It has to," she said.

He looked unsure. Worry lines creased his brow. She stood on bare tiptoes and kissed his forehead.

"We need two backs to carry this weight. Together we are powerful, Bola," she said.

She unfastened his pants and let them drop to the floor. Holding his penis, she pulled back the dense foreskin, feeling the wide purplish head stiffen.

"*Chi hollo li*," she said, the Choctaw words rolled off her tongue, "You know that right? I love you."

He felt small droplets of semen pooling at the tip.

"Yes," he answered, his breath quickened.

"This will hurt," she said, and jammed a finger in. He bled like a

virgin.

π

It was easy to coax her out of the kitchen.

Bola had purposely missed the communal noon meal by working through it. Stewart had no problem with that when he went to check on him, and praised Bola's work ethic, chastising the other slaves whose bodies ached because of their continuous movement from can-see to can't-see each day. Some of the slaves cut their eyes at Bola as they passed by the smithy to get to the feeding tables. When meal time was over, and weary bodies headed back to the fields, Bola snuck around to the kitchen door that led to Celestine's quarters.

"What you want, Bola?" she asked, her face dusted with cornmeal, her hands wringing a cooking rag. Ouida the head cook eavesdropped on them, making loud cleaning noises to cover their conversation from the owners but not herself.

"I ain't eat yet. Can you fix me somethin'?"

"What makes you think there's some leftovers waitin' on you, man?"

He put a bold foot on the bottom step that led to the inside. She looked down at his foot, then up at him. She smiled.

"Master Stewart see that foot, you'd be in trouble."

"Then help my foot not get in trouble."

Ouida saw this and rolled her eyes at them both. Celestine pushed past the older woman, grabbed a clean table napkin, and wrapped a chunk of cornbread dipped in pot liquor and a thick piece of fatback inside. She had been saving it for her own dinner. She handed it to Bola.

"You gotta live on that for now; the beans are all gone."

"Thank you," he said.

"Mhmmm…."

"Did you eat yet?"

"No."

"I'll be over by the chicken coop. Come eat with me."

Her eyes narrowed. She looked over her shoulder.

"*Telemi kalo*," he said.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"Come with me."

Ouida shook her head. Glared at Bola.

"Master Stewart come through, don't tell him where I am," Celestine said.

"You playin' with fire, gal," Ouida said, handing Celestine a smaller chunk of cornbread.

Bola walked ahead of Celestine just in case anyone else was

watching them. He casually passed Tchula's cabin. He could hear Celestine's heavy footsteps behind him, and he picked up his pace to distance himself until they were in the clear, hidden by the chicken coop behind the smithy.

Bola leaned against a tree and ate the bread and swallowed the fatty meat that greased his lips. Celestine slid her cornbread in her apron.

"I thought you wanted me to eat with you," she said.

"I'll watch you eat."

"Why you sniffin' around me?"

"C'mere," he said. He grabbed for her arm. She pulled back. But not too far.

"Quit playin' with me, man."

"I got no time to play. Only two days left before I'm gone."

"My sister—"

"She don't want me no more."

"Why not?"

"*O rewa gan lobinrin*," he said.

"What are you saying to me?"

"*Moferan e*…I like you."

"Master Stewart—"

"Ain't here."

His accent was more pronounced. Celestine wavered. To want to do it freely and not because she was forced—that was a gift. Bola held out his hand. She took it.

"*Oda*," he said.

She wondered if he felt like he was kissing Tchula. Her body would feel new, and yet it would not be new, not really. She fumbled with the buttons on her blouse as he lifted her skirt and apron and fingered her slowly. She spun herself around so that she was facing the tree and holding it with her hands.

"We have to watch out in case someone finds us. Master Stewart is talking with the overseer in the parlor," she said, but he was busy nibbling her earlobes, his hands running up and down her heavy breasts.

"Hurry," she said. He pulled down his pants and she reached around and guided him in.

"*Be' ni—yara, yara—*" he said with gritted teeth.

"English, Bola, please say it in English," she moaned.

"Yes, faster, faster," he yammered.

She came before he did. He made sure of that.

Later that day, he slept with Tchula. They held one another, their heartbeats pounding in their ears. Earlier Tchula had smoked tobacco leaves in a tightly wrapped cigar and blew the smoke into a mound

of dirt on her altar. Bola gave the mound holes for eyes, a mouth, and a nose. Tchula blew smoke into the dirt mouth and opened the way for their deities to come through.

Tchula had stolen a chicken from the coop, slit its throat and fed their gods with the gushing of blood and prayers on her altar. The presence of heavy Red and Black Gods mingling together and meeting for the first time bent Tchula's and Bola's backs. The spirits rode them, exhausting their limbs. Requests were made to the Red and the Black, and she felt their escape was imminent. There was no turning back.

"What if I never see you again?" he asked Tchula in the twilight of their rest. She didn't answer him. A tingling in her stomach let her know she was afraid to. Any doubt released from her lips would taint their bond. Instead, she placed her lips on his. Maybe she could make him plant a new seed in her. One that she could grow in free soil.

She slid on top of him. Tired limbs or not, she would remember every part of his body. He was asleep when she whispered in his ear, "I will find you."

The overseer and Junior came for Bola at nine that evening. They shackled his arms and legs and transported him onto a supply carriage. Tchula watched Junior strike his horses and carry Bola away into the dark. Master Stewart would follow them in a few days.

Celestine consoled Tchula when she threw herself down on her pallet.

"He'll use you tonight," Tchula said when her tears finally dried up.

"I know," Celestine said, resolved to her endless fate.

"Promise me something," Tchula said.

"What?"

"Think of mama's grave."

"Why would I want to do that?" Celestine asked.

Tchula reached out and hugged Celestine. Huddled on the disheveled pallet, Tchula squeezed Celestine's shoulders.

"Just think of Itta for me, please."

Celestine pulled herself free from Tchula's smothering arms. She gazed into Tchula's piercing eyes.

"I will," Celestine answered, still puzzled with the request.

π

Stewart summoned Celestine to his private bedroom in a downstairs wing of the main house. Mrs. Stewart had retired only a half hour earlier after having a nightcap in their parlor, so Celestine was a little thrown off by the scheduling. He would usually wait until his wife had been asleep for some time before crawling out of their marital

bed to enjoy his debauchery with Celestine.

She arrived in a pale blue housedress that doubled as a nightgown. Stewart smoked a cigar and watched her undress. She flung the dress across a divan near the full-sized bed. Pulling back the satin bed linens, she positioned herself on her back. She watched Stewart methodically remove each article of clothing and place it on a wing-backed chair across from the bed. He was a man of average height, with a slender physique, but his stomach was bloated and looked like it belonged to a much heavier man. Lying there, Celestine wondered if he had worms.

Stewart kneeled before Celestine and parted her knees, lifting her limbs over his shoulders. Celestine felt her back and buttocks sliding on the cool sheets, and the lips of her lightly haired vulva opened to the warmth from Stewart's hands. Candles flickered, illuminating her body, her skin taking on a deep orange glow that contrasted with the stark white sheets. Stewart took his right pinky finger and parted her dusky inner labia to reveal her pink insides. He gripped his penis with his left hand and inserted himself, enjoying the fact that Celestine was moist so early.

Her eyes were closed, her lips pursed into a thin line. Stewart partially pulled out, then thrust again, engrossed in the grip of her sex and the light/dark interplay of his penis and her slick orifice. He shifted his weight, driving his knees into the mattress. He moved her legs to wrap around his waist.

"Open your eyes," he said.

Celestine obeyed. Stewart's face bore down on her, his passionate tempo faster. Celestine studied his tense expression, his eyes mere slits. She tried to imagine what Bola's face looked like in the midst of his pleasure, their coupling against the tree still vivid in her mind. She tried to recall the words he whispered in her ear in his native tongue, the calloused grip of his hands on her nipples, the muscles of his chest pressing on her back. She felt her vaginal walls quiver then squeeze, a surge of tension racing down her spine as Stewart grabbed her hair from the back, pulling her head forward. He reached his peak. He would finish soon. She pumped her hips furiously to hurry him.

He opened his eyes.

"Oh!" he gasped, his eyes widening. Celestine stopped moving. This wasn't his usual response to climax. He gazed down below her navel, down to his penis. He drew out his glistening member, grabbed it with both hands. There were two visible bite marks on the tip of the glans. Two tear-sized drops of blood pooled on the skin and dripped down onto the sheets.

"What have you done?" he barked, color draining from his face.

Stewart's penis swelled, turning deep purple. His breath became ragged chirps. He stared between her legs. Celestine felt a fullness pulsating inside her. She shifted her weight, and raised herself up with her hands.

Her labia pushed open. Two long segmented limbs, thin like twigs, poked out hauling out six more brown legs. Eight feral-looking black eyes shined up at Stewart. Its venomous fangs throbbed as it drew out its entire body from Celestine's vagina. Its abdomen was as big as a man's fist. Each spider leg was a foot long. Stewart's naked body fell backwards to the floor, and Celestine jumped off the bed, screaming. The spider regarded her coolly. Knowingly.

She heard the stampede of feet from upstairs. Muffled shouts were moving down towards her. The overseer and a sallow-faced male house servant burst into the room. Celestine draped her house dress around her nakedness and stood on the divan. The overseer knelt down by Stewart.

"What did you do to him?"

"He was bitten by a spider."

"Where is it? Did you kill it?"

"On the bed!" She pointed.

The house servant cautiously smoothed down the bed linen with one hand while holding a kerosene lamp with the other. A small glint caught his eye. He squinted, moved his hand to the bed and held up a miniature metal spider. He stared at Celestine, then hid the metalwork in his bed clothes and sank to his knees on the floor. He gaped at the bite marks on Stewart's blackened penis.

"Lyle!" Mrs. Stewart staggered into the room. Celestine took advantage of the distraction. She pulled on the housedress and slipped out.

π

Celestine ran to Tchula's cabin and found it empty. A small fire blazed in the fireplace, burning off mounds of herbs. All of Tchula's jars were smashed on the floor. Her altar was gone. On the oak table, Celestine saw a stuffed burlap bag and the little metal bird, Bola's first gift to Tchula.

Outside, the commotion of the main house rose to a loud din, waking slaves in their quarters. Beyond the door she could see dark bodies striding towards the chaos. Ouida shuffled into the cabin, out of breath and holding her side.

"We need your sister," Ouida said.

"She's gone."

"God help us," Ouida said, and rushed back to the house.

Celestine picked up the bird and tapped its beak. The wings

flapped with a tinkling sound. Her eyes caught sight of the empty pallet. She remembered Tchula's tears, her strong arms squeezing her shoulders, and—

"Itta," Celestine said. A fearful smile spread across her face. Itta's grave. Tchula would be there, waiting for her. She closed her hand around the bird and held it to her breast.

"Let's get free," she said.

Draping the burlap bag around her shoulder, she ran out of the cabin, past the smithy and the chicken coop. She ran past the Tupelo trees and cotton fields, past all the pain. In the distance, she saw Tchula standing behind a group of maple trees, waving for her to run faster. Celestine ran so fast that she felt like she could extend her arms and soar.

And she did.

Acknowledgments: It's a Family Affair

Nisi Shawl

This book was born of love. Love is work. Love is wealth. And wealth and work are two of love's expressions.

The field of speculative fiction has been likened over and over to a large family. That's certainly the case for those of us who Octavia touched, personally or through her writings. Expressing love is what families are meant to do. You can see this clearly when you look at what went into *Bloodchildren*.

Octavia E. Butler lived. She lived, and was loved, and made so much possible with her life.

In 2006, Octavia died. We can't make that not have happened. But we can redeem the meaning of her death for those who survive her. And that is what we're doing, what we had already begun to do before now, what we hope to keep doing.

Nalo Hopkinson, Jaime Levine, Kate Schaefer, Lisa Gold, Merrilee Heifetz, Pam Noles, Leslie Howle, Gordon Van Gelder, and many others came together in the wake of our loss of Octavia to found a scholarship in her name, dedicated to providing other writers of color with an experience she claimed had been, for her, essential: attendance at the Clarion West or Clarion six-week workshops. Some people helped to publicize the fund and make initial contributions to it, including Harlan Ellison, Walter Mosley, and Steven Barnes. The Carl Brandon Society agreed to become the fund's administrators, though at the time doing so strained our resources. It was an important job, and the timing wasn't anyone's choice.

Countless people have made donations in the years since the Octavia E. Butler Memorial Scholarship was conceived: hours, effort, magnificently large chunks of change and modest ones that definitely added up. You're contributing by buying *Bloodchildren*. If you'd like to contribute more, visit http://www.carlbrandon.org/butlerscholarship/index.html to make an online donation. Or send us a check made out to the Carl Brandon Society and noted as earmarked for the Octavia E. Butler Memorial Scholarship Fund. Here's our mailing address:

Carl Brandon Society
P.O. Box 23336
Seattle, WA 98102

The science fiction convention WisCon's parent organization, the Society for the Furtherance and Study of Fantasy and Science Fiction, granted us $2000 to cover *Bloodchildren*'s publication. This money helped to pay the Butler Scholars for their fabulously fine stories, me for the weeks I spent editing them, Laurie T. Edison for producing the book's gorgeous cover photo, and various other expenses I won't go into here. Carl Brandon Society Secretary Victor J. Raymond was instrumental in obtaining the SF3 grant and in administering the scholarship.

Arisia '13 gave us a convention at which to stage the anthology's launch party, and their Guests of Honor, Steven Barnes and Tananarive Due—along with author Stephen Graham Jones—provided *Bloodchildren* with wonderfully heartfelt endorsements.

Shweta Narayan's story "Falling into the Earth" previously appeared in the anthology *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction Inspired by the Ramayana* (Zubaan Books, 2012). We're very grateful to editors Anil Menon and Vandana Singh for permission to reprint it here.

"Speech Sounds," by Octavia E. Butler, originally appeared in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* (1983). Octavia's literary executor Merrilee Heifetz, a senior agent at Writers House, has graciously agreed to let us reprint it in *Bloodchildren*.

In addition to contributing her brief memoir of interactions with Octavia over thirty years, Vonda N. McIntyre took all *Bloodchildren*'s texts and graphics and made them into a book. Her extraordinary skill and patience deserve the highest praise, so please join me in giving that to her. Book View Café, which Vonda helped found, is responsible for *Bloodchildren*'s distribution; because of this we thank the organization as a whole and all its members.

For making it possible for you to find this book by developing publicity for it, we're thankful to the inimitable Eileen Gunn. Eileen also wrote Vonda's true-if-not-necessarily-factual biography, another reason for us to tell her how deeply we appreciate her. How deeply? River deep, mountain high.

Nalo Hopkinson wrote the anthology's introduction, lending *Bloodchildren* her lustrous glamor despite the pressure of academic commitments, the demands of her muse, and the draining effects of chronic illness.

Candra K. Gill, President of the Carl Brandon Society, designed the book's cover. She incorporated the aforementioned photo by Laurie T. Edison, who for six years has given each of the Butler Scholars a

silver replica of the owl pendant she created for Octavia. Candra is also in charge of the Carl Brandon Society website, including implementing all the changes made necessary by *Bloodchildren*'s publication.

Kath Wilham of Aqueduct Press proofed the anthology's texts at lightning speed and with a sharp and excellent eye.

Of course, none of this would have done anyone any good without the stories offered here by the eleven Butler Scholars: Christopher Caldwell, Shweta Narayan, Caren Gussoff, Mary Elizabeth Burroughs, Rochita Loenen-Ruiz, Kai Ashante Wilson, Erik Owomoyela, Jeremy Sim, Dennis Y. Ginoza, Indrapramit Das, and Lisa Bolekaja. Thank you all for writing such moving, strange, powerful, challenging, hilarious, enchanting, frightening stuff. As literary offspring of our genre family's matriarch you make us all very, very proud.

Contributor Biographies

Nalo Hopkinson, born in Jamaica, has lived in Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana, and Canada. She is currently an Associate Professor at University of California Riverside. In 1999 she helped found the Carl Brandon Society. Nalo is the author of six novels, a story collection, and *Report from Planet Midnight*, a collection comprising stories, an historic speech, and an interview. Nalo edited the anthologies *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction* and *Mojo: Conjure Stories*, and is co-editor of *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction*. She has received multiple honors, including the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, the World Fantasy Award, the Sunburst Award, and the Gaylactic Spectrum Award. Her novel *Sister Mine* is a March 2013 release from Grand Central Publishing.

Octavia Estelle Butler (June 22, 1947 – February 24, 2006) was an American science fiction writer. A recipient of both the Hugo and Nebula awards, Butler was one of the best known African American women in the field. In 1995, she became the first science fiction writer to receive the MacArthur Foundation "Genius" Grant. Admired for her diamond-like prose and her unflinching willingness to confront difficult topics, Octavia was also beloved as a teacher for her warmth, grace, and honesty. She taught several times at both the Clarion West and Clarion workshops, which have served as training grounds for the authors of *Bloodchildren*'s stories.

Book View Café founding member **Vonda N. McIntyre** keeps a large personal menagerie: wild snakes, tame wolves, and cloned dinosaurs, plus a huge mole named Philby that sleeps on the hassock in her office, and a wolverine named Ursula, of which she is inordinately fond. In harmony with Pacific Northwest reverence for the land, Vonda has created an urban-wildlife rescue area, with crocuses, on the parking strip in front of her house, attracting native raccoons, possums, bald eagles, and the occasional retired grunge band.

Vonda also controls a vast woodland empire, in which she has built a stately pleasure-dome out of recycled Popsicle-sticks. She oversaw the planting of thousands of tiny trees on this preserve, many of which have grown to enormous size. Through her domain runs a trout-stream with genuine trout in it. She feeds the trout her famous

home-made chocolate decadence, which they take from her hand, emitting chirps of oncorhynchoid pleasure. It's terrifyingly bucolic and yet reassuringly picturesque.

Christopher Caldwell attended the Clarion West Workshop in 2007 and received the Octavia E. Butler Scholarship that same year. He is a black American from Los Angeles with heavy family ties to Louisiana, and is interested in exploring questions of race, gender, and sexuality through fiction. He currently lives in Scotland with his husband and collaborator Alexander Kelly, where they are at work on a novel.

Shweta Narayan was born in India and has lived in Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, the Netherlands, Scotland, and California. She makes her home in liminal spaces. She was the Octavia E. Butler Memorial Scholarship recipient for Clarion in 2007, where she wrote the first two drafts of "Falling into the Earth." Shweta's fiction and poetry have recently appeared in places such as *Strange Horizons, Goblin Fruit, The Apex Book of World SF 2*, *Nebula Awards Showcase 2012*, and *Steampunk II: Steampunk Reloaded*.

Caren Gussoff is a science fiction writer living in Seattle. The author of *Homecoming* (2000), and *The Wave and Other Stories* (2003), first published by Serpent's Tail/High Risk Books, Gussoff has also been published in anthologies by Seal Press and Hadley Rille, as well as in *Abyss & Apex, Cabinet des Fées, Fantasy Magazine*, and *M-BRANE*. She received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1998, and in 2008 was the Carl Brandon Society's Octavia E. Butler Scholar at Clarion West. She's currently shopping around a novel set in post-pandemic Puget Sound. Find her at spitkitten.com.

Mary Elizabeth Burroughs is an American writer. She earned an MFA in fiction from the University of Mississippi as a Grisham fellow. In 2008, she studied speculative fiction at the Clarion Writers' Workshop at UC San Diego as an Octavia E. Butler Scholar. She lives in Australia.

Rochita Loenen-Ruiz attended the Clarion West Writers Workshop in 2009 as the recipient of the Octavia E. Butler Scholarship. A Filipina writer, Rochita currently lives in the Netherlands. Her work has appeared in a variety of online and print periodicals, including *Interzone, Apex Magazine, Philippine Genre Stories, Weird Fiction Review*, and *Our Own Voice*. When she is not engaged in frantic bouts of writing, she keeps house, tends to her children, gives piano lessons, and volunteers for a Filipino women's organization. She has a website at http://rcloenenruiz.com.

Kai Ashante Wilson was the 2010 recipient of the Octavia E. Butler

Scholarship at Clarion in San Diego. He lives in New York City.

Erik Owomoyela was born and raised in Lincoln, Nebraska, where he gained an appreciation for open skies. After studying political science and journalism at the University of Iowa, he tried his hand briefly at world travel and less briefly at small-town newspaper reporting before attending the Clarion West Writers Workshop in 2010 as a recipient of the Octavia E. Butler Memorial Scholarship. He currently resides in Seattle, with his laptop and the car he drove from Iowa.

Jeremy Sim was recently stuffed in a box and mailed to Germany, where he lives with his girlfriend Celine and their incredibly cute dog Rico. When not experimenting in the kitchen or playing video games, they take turns revising each other's writing, though Celine's is less fictional and contains more squiggly symbols. He will be repackaged and forwarded to another country when he perfects the thrilling technique of arriving at the platform just as the train pulls away.

Jeremy received the Octavia E. Butler Scholarship to attend Clarion West in 2011. Check on the excruciatingly slow progress of his author's website at www.jeremysim.com.

Dennis Y. Ginoza holds an MFA in Writing from Pacific University. His work has appeared in *Shimmer Magazine, Per Contra*, and *Phantom Drift*. His story "Other Names, Other Histories" was nominated for the 2012 Pushcart Prize. Dennis is very grateful to have received the 2011 Octavia E. Butler Memorial Scholarship to attend the Clarion Writers' Workshop in San Diego. He lives and works on the Kitsap Peninsula of Washington State.

Indrapramit Das is a writer and artist from Kolkata, India. His short fiction has appeared in *Clarkesworld, Asimov's, Apex Magazine, Redstone Science Fiction, The World SF Blog, Flash Fiction Online*, and the anthology *Breaking the Bow: Speculative Fiction Inspired by the Ramayana* (Zubaan Books). He is a grateful graduate of the 2012 Clarion West Writers Workshop, and one of two recipients of the Octavia E. Butler Memorial Scholarship for 2012. He completed his MFA at the University of British Columbia and is currently in Vancouver working as a freelance writer, artist, editor, game tester, extra, tutor, would-be novelist, and aspirant to adulthood.

Lisa Bolekaja is the second vice president of the Organization of Black Screenwriters, a former Film Independent Screenwriting Fellow, a Guy Hanks/Marvin Miller Screenwriting Fellow (aka the Bill and Camille Cosby Fellowship), and a Nicholl Fellowship Semifinalist. Her script "Skin," based on her own short story, was optioned in 2005. She's a proud member of the Black Science Fiction

Society and wants to explore Afrofuturism through her Black Indian heritage and the African diaspora. She was the Octavia E. Butler Scholar attending Clarion in 2012 (“The Year of the Awkward Robot”). She wrote “The Saltwater African” during her final week in the program.

Nisi Shawl is a cofounder of the Carl Brandon Society and author of the James Tiptree, Jr. Award-winning story collection *Filter House*. Recent publications include “In Blood and Song” in *Dark Faith 2* and “Salt on the Dance Floor” in *Oceans Unleashed*. With her Clarion West classmate Cynthia Ward she wrote *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach*. In 2011 she edited *WisCon Chronicles 5: Writing and Racial Identity*, and she’s coeditor, with Dr. Rebecca Holden, of the forthcoming Aqueduct Press nonfiction anthology *Strange Matings: Octavia E. Butler, Feminism, Science Fiction, and African American Voices*. Nisi was a friend of Octavia’s and misses her every day.

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Stories by the Octavia E. Butler Scholars
edited by Nisi Shawl

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